

2015

A Widow's Purview: A Microhistory of Widowhood and Gender Relations in the Late Eighteenth-Century Virginia Backcountry

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<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-mp9h-rk43>

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A Widow's Purview:
A Microhistory of Widowhood and Gender Relations in the Late Eighteenth-Century
Virginia Backcountry

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Bachelor of Arts, McGill University, 2014

A thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of History

The College of William and Mary
August, 2015


APPROVAL PAGE

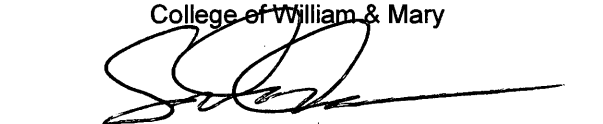
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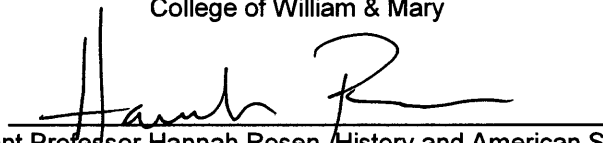
Master of Arts


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ABSTRACT

This study looks at the experience of widowhood and its implication for family and gender relations, as well as community life, through a microhistorical focus on the case of Susanna Smith Preston (1740-1823). Susanna lived a widow for forty years. Her husband, Revolutionary war colonel and land surveyor William Preston (1729-1783), owned a vast estate comprising land and plantation homes across the Virginia backcountry, as well as dozens of slaves. William's will did not appoint Susanna as one of the executors of the estate, thereby severely limiting, at least on paper, Susanna's involvement in managing the Preston family's economic affairs.

The settlement of William's estate stretched over decades and not only involved the four men listed as executors, but also several other kinsmen who occupied trusted positions in their communities and who had the opportunity to travel across the backcountry to settle debts and inheritance business. Yet, Susanna's experience demonstrates that there existed space for initiative by widows beyond what their husband's will prescribed and beyond gendered expectations about women's roles within the family and society. Susanna ensured that her daughters were well-provided for through family inheritance, exercised considerable leadership in managing the estate slaves, participated in commercial networks within her family and community, and contributed to decisions about her children's education. The case of Susanna Smith Preston thus exemplifies the flexibility of familial economic systems following the death of the head of the household in the early republic.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am first and foremost indebted to Professor Karin Wulf for her mentorship. Through discussions about my thesis research, reading suggestions, and a semester-long seminar, she has compelled me to constantly rethink my assumptions about family and gender history, and to expand my interpretive lenses when looking at primary materials. I am also especially grateful to Professor Scott Nelson and Professor Hannah Rosen for their insightful comments on my project and their helpful suggestions. It has been an honor to learn from such astute scholars.

My classmates and colleagues in the Lyon G. Tyler Department of History have made my experience here thoroughly enjoyable and stimulating. Special thanks to Joe, Stephen, Nate, Peter, and Matt, as well as to Sarah, for their friendship, sense of humor, and intellectual inquisitiveness. Finally, my parents and my brother deserve all my gratitude for their unfailing support throughout my education and all the many big and small joys they have brought me. It is to them that I dedicate my work.

To Philippe, Lucie, and François, who mean the world to me. Merci pour tout.

In the words of her son Francis, Susanna Smith Preston (1740-1823) “pass[ed] a long life in a most exemplary manner as a wife, mother and widow.”¹ Her daughter Letitia also remembered Susanna as an “excellent lady” whose “domestic virtues” inspired her husband William Preston to compose celebratory poems.² During Susanna’s elderly years, her children referred to her as their “venerable” mother who, according to her son James, “spent a long life in the performance of every Christian duty and the practice of every virtue.”³ Susanna’s children surely held unspoken assumptions about what it meant to be a “venerable” woman and widow among the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Virginian elite. Beyond their gendered praises stood an individual who lived no less than forty years of her life as a widow, who fully participated in the development of the familial estate, and who, sadly, left little trace of her own voice.

Most likely fallen prey to a deadly stroke in the summer of 1783, Colonel William Preston left behind a wife of more than twenty years, ten living children ranging from twenty-one to two years of age, one more child on the way, and a vast and complex estate that included, among other property, two large plantation homes, more than twenty thousand acres of land in Virginia and what would later become West Virginia and Kentucky, upwards of forty slaves, almost ninety heads of cattle,

¹ Francis Preston, memoranda book about the Preston estate written in 1833-1834, pp. 2. Preston Family Papers – Gray Collection, Filson Historical Society (FHS).

² Letitia Preston Floyd to Rush Floyd, 22 February 1843. Transcribed by June Stubbs and introduced by Wirt H. Wills as “Part 1: Recollections of 18th Century Virginia Frontier Life.” In *The Smithfield Review: Studies in the History of the Region West of the Blue Ridge* 1 (1997): 15.

³ Eliza Madison to William Preston, 16 February 1818, Preston Family Papers – Davie Collection; Eliza Madison to William Preston, 7 January 1819, Preston Family Papers – Gray Collection; James P. Preston to Susanna Smith Preston, 14 June 1818, Preston Family Papers – Davie Collection, FHS.

and quite a few debts to be settled.⁴ Little is known about Susanna's life before her marriage to William in 1761. Susanna's daughter Letitia later recounted how thirty-something William, an ambitious land surveyor, local politician and militiaman, fell for the "beauty and manners" of young Susanna, the "extremely beautiful" daughter of prosperous carpenter Francis Smith. Certainly an accomplished lady, Susanna had been educated in her Hanover County parish by none other than Reverend Patrick Henry, uncle and tutor of the famed revolutionary.⁵

Together, William and Susanna ran one of the most prominent households of the eighteenth-century Virginia backcountry. According to the 1782 personal property tax list, no single taxpayer in Montgomery County possessed more slaves or cattle heads than William. This traditionally understudied geographical area operated within a larger tobacco-orientated, slave-based plantation economy, but a great many of its inhabitants owned neither land nor slaves.⁶ William's ownership of more than seven percent of the county's slaves set the Preston family apart and connected the Prestons to the material success and ambitions of the seaboard elite.⁷

⁴ Richard Charles Osborn, "William Preston of Virginia, 1727-1783: The Making of a Frontier Elite" (PhD Dissertation, University of Maryland, 1990), 381-82, 476-77. An Inventory and Appraisement of the Estate of William Preston dec'd taken March 1790. Campbell-Preston-Floyd Family Papers, vol. 2, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, microfilm Box 2 Reel 1.

⁵ Letitia Preston Floyd to Rush Floyd, 22 February 1843, "Part 1," 10.

⁶ In her study on the backcountry merchant John Hook, Ann Smart Martin notes that only a quarter of Hook's customers in the counties of Bedford, Botetourt, and Fincastle owned both land and slaves. Landowners who did not possess slaves often preferred wheat and corn to tobacco farming, which demanded a substantial labor force. Martin argues that the lack of unifying economic pursuit among the inhabitants of the Virginia backcountry and the multiplicity of their agricultural models formed "the very essence of backcountry character." *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 72, 95, 97.

⁷ There were a total of 565 slaves in the county and 1339 free male over 21. *Tax list of Montgomery County, Virginia, 1782*, compiled and edited by Mary B. Kegley (Roanoke: 1974).

Following her husband's death, however, forty-three-year-old Susanna occupied a new position vis-à-vis the law, and a somewhat ambiguous one within her family and community. William's death marked the end of Susanna's legal coverture, meaning she could now sign contracts in her own name, incur debts and prosecute her debtors, make her own will, and issue a deed.⁸ In the eyes of the law, her new *feme sole* status rendered possible a wider range of relationships with her community. The passing of the head of household also transformed family dynamics and signified the need to find strategies to maintain and advance the family's socio-economic status. William's will prescribed a division of tasks in managing the estate and family affairs between Susanna, their two older sons John and Francis, and other kinsmen. Sons Francis and John, but not their mother, were named executors of the estate alongside their cousins John Breckinridge and John Brown.

How did these testamentary provisions translate into reality and how was Susanna involved in the running of the estate, considering both her newfound legal status and the gendered social and familial constraints placed on her? Thanks to the preeminent military and political careers of Susanna's husband and of many of her sons and grandsons, the Preston family is very well documented in comparison to most backcountry households. Susanna's life and experiences thus provide a particularly valuable case study to explore the workings of gender and family relations after the death of a household's patriarch in tandem with race relations, geographic location, and socio-economic status.

⁸ Linda E. Speth, "More Than Her 'Thirds': Wives and Widows in Colonial Virginia," in *Women, Family, and Community in Colonial America: Two Perspectives*, ed. Carol Berkin (New York: The Haworth Press and the Institute for Research in History, 1983), 8.

A general historiographical tendency to conflate the categories of “wives” and “women” when studying women’s interactions with their community, kin, and various levels of socio-economic institutions, has long defined the field of women’s and gender history. This “essentializing of marriage” has contributed to obscuring the experiences of single women and widows.⁹ However, as many young women married older suitors, and as death rates were high, wives who survived their pregnancies often outlived their husbands, making widowhood not an exception to the rule but a different stage in many women’s lives. While widowhood still does not appear prominently in scholarship on women in early America, a number of historians have given attention to widows as in-between figures operating at the crossroads of contemporary gender conventions. Widows occupied “a liminal state between what was understood to be masculine (independent, economic, political) and what was clearly feminine (dependent and domestic).”¹⁰ The difficulty in interpreting widows’ societal position thus stems from the dichotomy between their independent legal status and the gendered constraints placed on women by prevailing ideologies.

Eighteenth-century notions of femininity and masculinity largely functioned with regards to married individuals acting in a complementary – and hierarchical – fashion. Though no longer legal dependents, widows still interacted with a society that

⁹ Karin Wulf, *Not All Wives: The Women of Colonial Philadelphia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 6-11. Ariela R. Dubler, “In the Shadow of Marriage: Single Women and the Legal Construction of the Family and the State,” *The Yale Law Journal* 112 (2003): 1649.

¹⁰ Wulf, *Not All Wives: The Women of Colonial Philadelphia*, 5. See also Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), 133. Terri L. Snyder also characterized widows’ societal position as “ambiguous and liminal.” Terri L. Snyder, *Brabbling Women: Disorderly Speech and the Law in Early Virginia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 119.

defined all women as needing male supervision.¹¹ That widows enjoyed greater freedom to construct their own social identities than married women, who were first and foremost “wives,” provoked serious anxieties among elite men as reflected in the number of advice manuals, religious sermons, plays, and journal articles that discussed widowhood in colonial America.¹²

Yet, historians such as Lisa Wilson have noted that, beyond ideological pressures, family needs and family strategies about how to meet those needs informed widows’ daily actions and decisions.¹³ For their part, Marylynn Salmon, Yvonne Pitts, and Ariela R. Dubler have insisted on the primacy of law in structuring widows’ – and more broadly women’s – access to property and economic autonomy.¹⁴ Dubler suggests that marriage has historically functioned as the chief “normative legal model” structuring the gender, family, and community relations even of women who never married or who were not married anymore. For instance, the idea of a dower, that a husband must set aside at least a third of his real estate for his wife’s support after his death, ideologically and temporally extended the husband’s positioning as the

¹¹ Kirsten E. Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 6.

¹² Concerned with the possibility for widows to assert economic and sexual freedom, prescriptive literature suggested two avenues for maintaining a widow’s respectability and the good order of the community: either remaining frugal, chaste, and devoted to God and to the memory of their husband, or, if necessity dictated it, especially in the case of young widows with minor children, remarrying and entrusting their support to a new male figure. Vivian Bruce Conger, *The Widows’ Might: Widowhood and Gender in Early British America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 7, 23-42, 154-55.

¹³ Lisa Wilson, *Life after Death: Widows in Pennsylvania, 1750-1850* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 5. See also Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War*, 13. Linda L. Sturtz, *Within Her Power: Propertied Women in Colonial Virginia* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 127.

¹⁴ A key premise underlying her work on women and property in Early America, Salmon argues that “it is a mistake [...] to emphasize custom over formal rules of law when discussing the status of women in past times. What women could or could not do within their own communities often was determined by a wider social context that included formal rules of law.” *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), xiii.

provider of the household and the wife's dependent status.¹⁵ Pitts sees testamentary provisions as functioning similarly because, through a will, "testators retained authority over their wives and children's future behavior."¹⁶

However, a strict focus on legal norms neither fully explains the choices made by husbands while designing their wills, nor how their estates were actually managed after their death. For Michel Foucault, laws, like political institutions, "are only the terminal forms power takes."¹⁷ A microhistorical approach allows for a better grasp of how individuals in their daily lives moved within this overarching social and legal structure.¹⁸ Mapping an individual's familial and communal networks "from which the relationships, decisions, restraints, and freedoms faced by real people in actual situations would emerge" constitutes a central methodological tool for microhistorians to ground their study of the past in the materiality of their subjects.¹⁹ A close focus on specific historical actors helps illuminate why they may have made certain decisions considering a variety of factors including, but not limited to, legal norms.

¹⁵ Dubler conceives of the dower as a privatized subsistence mechanism that operated just as marriage did. In theory, women remained under economic guardianship of a male figure to prevent them from needing public support, first a father, then a husband, whose guardianship extended after his death through the dower. Dubler, "In the Shadow of Marriage: Single Women and the Legal Construction of the Family and the State," 1651, 57, 68.

¹⁶ Yvonne Pitts, *Family, Law, and Inheritance in America: A Social and Legal History of Nineteenth-Century Kentucky* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 46.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1990), 92-94.

¹⁸ While writing monographs of great breadth, Historians such as Carole Shammas and Linda Sturtz have pointed to the particular usefulness of a close focus on the 'everyday' to capture women's experiences in the 18th century. Shammas has suggested that in the decades following the Revolution, "most protests [against patriarchal authority] occurred on an individual level" since there existed little public outlet for women's complaints. *A History of Household Government in America*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 65. Similarly, Sturtz has stated that "women's resistance often occurred within the 'dailiness' of their lives." Sturtz, *Within Her Power: Propertied Women in Colonial Virginia*, 7.

¹⁹ Edward Muir, "Introduction: Observing Trifles," in *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*, ed. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), ix-x.

William Preston could have named his wife executrix or co-executrix of his estate, as some men did, but he chose not to. William could have bequeathed at least a part of his large estate solely to his wife without restrictions, like his close friend John Floyd did the year before, but he chose not to.²⁰ At the same time, such testamentary provisions did not prevent Susanna from significantly contributing to family affairs and from being involved in her broader economic community. Studying the historical experience of widowhood in the early republic through a close focus on Susanna Smith Preston reveals that particular economic arrangements after the death of the head of a household brought interdependence and a sharing of responsibilities among family members. Within these complex familial relationships, there existed space for initiative by widows beyond what their husband's will prescribed. Indeed, while pragmatic considerations likely informed William Preston's decision to name sons and nephews as executors of his estate but not his spouse, Susanna still contributed in tandem with the leading young men of the family to the distribution of the estate, to the development of familial patrimony, and to decisions about the education of her children.

A discussion of William's will in relation to contemporary practices provides a necessary starting point to explore Susanna's experience of widowhood and family

²⁰ John Floyd was engaged in the surveying business alongside William Preston and married Preston's adoptive daughter Jane Buchanan. In 1783, shortly before dying of a gun wound on the Kentucky frontier where he had just established his family, Floyd wrote a will in which he bequeathed his main tract of land with the family dwelling to his wife "and her heirs for Ever," even in the event of a remarriage, and in which he named his wife co-executrix of the estate along with a male friend. "The Will of John Floyd," in *John Floyd: The Life and Letters of a Frontier Surveyor*, ed. Neal Hammon (Louisville: Butler Books, 2013), 231-234.

life beyond gendered expectations. The very fact that William Preston produced a will is significant because not all men did, especially those from poorer backgrounds. That some men nonetheless chose to write wills instead of leaving intestacy laws determine the division of their estates suggest the importance granted to inherited property in family economies in early America.²¹ Had William not written a will, intestacy laws would have determined Susanna's share of the inheritance and role in the administration of the estate. Dower rights provided the early American widow with means to support herself, and minor children if she had any, after her husband's death. Virginia intestacy laws defined dower rights as a life interest in a third of the husband's real property. Since a widow did not possess absolute rights to her "third," she could not pass it in her will on to whomever she desired as her "third" would subsequently be divided among her husband's lawful heirs. A testator could give more to his spouse, but allocating less than her intestate provisions rendered his estate vulnerable to legal challenges by the widow. In their quantitative study of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, Shammass, Salmon, and Dahlin found that 39.5 percent of affluent testators between 1685 and 1756 bequeathed more to their spouse than the prescribed third, but only 12 percent of these testators gave them absolute title to the property.²²

Compared to wills written by his contemporaries, William's will is quite complex, detailing over several pages scenarios for the allocation of his numerous

²¹ A study of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, records show that 24.7% of deceased men had probated wills between 1791 and 1801. Carole Shammass, Marylynn Salmon, and Michel Dahlin, *Inheritance in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 16-17.

²² *Ibid.*, 52.

tracts of lands to his numerous heirs.²³ William devised his will to allow his “dearly beloved & very affectionate wife” more than her dower share, at least until their children grew up, in order to guarantee her “comfortable support” and her ability to raise their minor children in the ease appropriate to their station. Susanna inherited the “use & profits” of all his plantations until each of the couple’s children reached adulthood, at which point the estate’s executors would gradually allocate them their specific share of the land. Susanna was then to enjoy an annuity paid by John and Francis of £50 in gold and 100 acres at the Horseshoe plantation. William also gave Susanna five years to decide which plantation she wanted to manage and live in, and she chose Smithfield, the couple’s main plantation home.²⁴ While benefiting from income from plantations, widows enjoying a life interest in real property like Susanna also inherited the responsibility to safeguard the value of the land for future heirs, for instance preserving buildings and fences.²⁵

What makes William’s will quite exceptional for the time period is both his wife’s control over thousands of acres of plantation land for several years – which represented for a time more than a widow’s prescribed third – and his bequest of an average of 700 acres of land for each of his five daughters alive at the time of writing

²³ William’s will included several conditional provisions. Allocations of land would differ if whether or not pregnant Susanna would give birth to a son, depending on which main residence Susanna chose, whether or not the executors would accomplish certain tasks, etc. For comparison, see John Floyd’s short will in *John Floyd: The Life and Letters of a Frontier Surveyor*, ed. Neal Hammon (Louisville: Butler Books, 2013), 231-234. As Floyd died young and with few children, his will necessitated few provisions for the division of his land. See also William Campbell’s 1780 will, which is straightforward in identifying which land was to be given to which heir. Campbell-Preston-Floyd Family Papers, vol. 2.

²⁴ “The Will of Colonel William Preston,” ed. by Elmer D. Johnson. *The Radford Review* 26, no. 2 (Summer 1972): 63-65.

²⁵ Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War*, 16.

his will in 1777. Southern elite landowners rarely bequeathed such extensive real estate to their daughters, preferring personal property such as slaves and household goods.²⁶ The Preston women's access to profits from land – often from tracts situated in undeveloped areas of the Kentucky frontier – largely resulted from the availability of land in relatively unsettled regions before the westward push following the Revolution and from William's speculation on land facilitated by his position as county surveyor. Indeed, from his Land Office as county surveyor, William became acquainted with the best opportunities to acquire fertile land for his own profit, a strategy adopted by a great many land officers of the eighteenth-century.²⁷ As he put no condition in his will restricting future husbands' control over his covert daughters' property, William may have devised such important bequests of land in promising western areas with an eye to increasing his daughters' marriage prospects, and thereby bringing other affluent men within the Preston family's sphere of influence in the backcountry.

Control over the distribution of the estate's personal property, especially of slaves, would prove one of Susanna's chief areas of leadership in managing the family patrimony in the decades following William's death. William decided that Susanna could temporarily enjoy the "use & profits" of slaves, cattle, and household goods. Contrary to real property, she, not the executors, was instructed to distribute personal property to the children as they either reached their majority or married. An appraisal

²⁶ Ibid., 29. See also the study of Bucks County wills, which reveals that less than a quarter of testators between 1685 and 1756 bequeathed land to daughters. Shammas, *Inheritance in America from Colonial Times to the Present*, 43.

²⁷ Malcom J. Rohrbough, *The Land Office Business: The Settlement and Administration of American Public Lands, 1789-1837* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1990), 28.

of William's estate conducted in March 1790 estimated the value of his personal property at more than £7,500, including farm animals, slaves, tools, and furniture. His forty-two slaves, evaluated at £4434,65, amounted to more than half of the value of his personalty.²⁸

While the testamentary provisions William made for Susanna appear generous, he nonetheless placed several restrictions or conditions on Susanna's benefits. First, she had to remain single. Should Susanna marry again, she would be entitled only to the dower thirds prescribed by intestacy laws. Eighteenth-century testators commonly included in their will a clause discouraging remarriage to prevent interference from outsiders in family patrimony.²⁹ Second, she and the executors had to use profits from the estate to secure quality education for the couple's children. Far from a constraint, this demand later constituted a significant sphere of influence for Susanna within the family. Lastly, William excluded Susanna from the executorship of the estate, thereby severely limiting, at least on paper and in the eyes of the law, Susanna's control over the estate. According to inheritance laws and customs, it was within the executors' purview to settle debts owed to or by the testator and to allocate to heirs the appropriate share of the patrimony. Newly-named executors also inherited the responsibility of tending to the management of whatever other estate the testator had been overseeing as an executor during his own lifetime.³⁰ The title of executor thus

²⁸ An Inventory and Appraisement of the Estate of William Preston dec'd taken March 1790. Campbell-Preston-Floyd Family Papers, vol. 2.

²⁹ Shammas, *Inheritance in America from Colonial Times to the Present*, 52.

³⁰ The Virginia legislature abolished the duty of taking over the deceased's executorship responsibilities in the 1824-25 session. Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: Norton, 1984), 37.

entailed a further extension of one's networks of obligation towards members of the community, as well as frequent interactions with legal institutions. Around the time William wrote his will, John Floyd and William Campbell, two of William's friends and backcountry relations whose sons would later marry Preston girls, had both granted their wives the title of co-executrix of their estate. William stated in his 1781 codicil that he "put the most unbounded confidence" in his wife.³¹ Why, then, did he not name her as one of the executors of the estate?

Looking at contemporary testamentary practices in Virginia, odds stood against Susanna. No quantitative studies exist yet on the Virginia backcountry west of the Blue Ridge, but evidence from other regions can help contextualize William's decision. Historians have highlighted a general decline in the number of men granting their wives an executrix title throughout the eighteenth century but have not successfully accounted for this downward trend. Kirsten E. Wood notes for instance that "fears of female incompetence cannot entirely explain trends in executorship, however, because husbands who named others as executors still entrusted their widows with large portions of their estate," but offers no alternative explanations. Terri L. Snyder found that in the second half of the seventeenth century, 70 percent of testators from York County, VA, designated their wives as sole executrix without any male supervision.³² In the Virginia piedmont county of Albemarle, 29.8 percent of wives were excluded from any involvement in the executorship of their husband's estates in the decade 1750-1759. For the period between 1770-1779, the proportion

³¹ "The Will of Colonel William Preston," 72.

³² Snyder, *Brabbling Women: Disorderly Speech and the Law in Early Virginia*, 123.

jumped to 52.5 percent.³³ Widows' comparatively privileged position in the seventeenth and early-eighteenth century could be explained by the limited time and opportunities for men during the earliest stages of colonial settlements to establish strong kinship networks with other trusted men, especially considering high mortality rates and diffuse patterns of settlements.³⁴ While no comprehensive studies address this question, such an absence of trusted kinsmen could have also characterized the experience of men pushing settlements across the frontier in the later eighteenth century, as was the case with William's friend John Floyd who died in 1783 at the hands of Native Americans in the Kentucky lands and who named his wife co-executrix.³⁵ Yet, William lived long enough in the backcountry to see the area develop substantially and to build strong connections with kinsmen living close to him.

Moreover, inheritance patterns establish a negative correlation between a testator's wealth and the likelihood that he named his wife executrix or among co-executors. In Petersburg, VA, between 1784 and 1830, 59.3 percent of testators with an estate evaluated as \$2,000 or less named their wife sole executrix and another 22.2 percent included their wife among the co-executors, showing a great degree of inclusion in managerial process. In the same period, none of the testators with estates valued at \$10,000 or more named their wife sole executrix and 36.8 percent named

³³ Shammass, *Inheritance in America from Colonial Times to the Present*, 60.

³⁴ Linda Sturtz suggests that the absence of "extended local networks of kin" in the seventeenth century meant that parents relied on each other to a great degree for their family's sake after the death of the one of the spouses, often blurring prescribed gender boundaries. Sturtz, *Within Her Power: Propertied Women in Colonial Virginia*, 24.

³⁵ "The Will of Colonel William Preston," 70. Letitia Preston Floyd to Rush Floyd, 22 February 1843. Transcribed by June Stubbs and introduced by Wirt H. Wills as "Part 2: John Floyd, Kentucky Hero, and Three Generations of Floyds and Prestons of Virginia." In *The Smithfield Review: Studies in the History of the Region West of the Blue Ridge* 2 (1998): 46.

her among co-executors, excluding the majority of wives from the estate's administration, at least on paper.³⁶ Finding similar results for the city of Philadelphia between 1750 and 1850, when 41.9 percent of upper-class men denied their wives the executorship, Lisa Wilson explains that, in addition to personal motives, the burden posed by the complexity of large estates discouraged many men from naming their wives sole executrix.³⁷

Yet, it did not seem improbable to William's relations that Susanna should be among his executors. Interestingly, two months after William's death, one of his creditors, a certain Andrew Millar, wrote to Susanna on the "presumption that you are an Executrix of Colonel Preston" with an account to be settled.³⁸ The handful of surviving documents connecting William to Millar do not allow for a satisfying assessment of how well Millar knew William personally and how familiar he was with William and Susanna's marital interactions. If he knew the couple well, did he expect Susanna to be an executrix based on Susanna's trustworthiness or her previous involvement in managerial decisions during their marriage?

Several pieces of evidence suggest that Susanna indeed participated in the running of the couple's plantations during William's repeated absences motivated by his surveying business or militia duties during frontier conflicts with Native Americans. In sparsely-settled frontier areas, the distance men needed to cover in order to fulfill their business and social duties allowed frontier women much

³⁶ Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860*, 38.

³⁷ Wilson, *Life after Death: Widows in Pennsylvania, 1750-1850*, 51.

³⁸ Susanna then passed the case on to the executors. A January 14th, 1784 letter from John Brown Jr. to John Preston mention a letter by Andrew Millar and an account with him to be settled, Preston Family Papers, "f series," Virginia Historical Society (VHS).

discretion in family business for extended periods of time.³⁹ In fact, for gentry men to have time to perform their social, commercial, political, and military status, their wife's help was indispensable.⁴⁰ In a 1777 letter to his wife, William, then negotiating with Cherokee leaders for territorial claims, suggested she "could contrive a Bag or two to James Dalzell & get some Flour." Susanna later updated him on the situation at Greenfield plantation, on tenants' progress with laboring tracts of land, and on her attempt to secure more bushels of corn.⁴¹

Moreover, in Virginia's eighteenth-century plantation economy, the planter's main home served both as a showplace of domestic refinement and a business center, which is why conceiving of gender roles as operating only within separate private and public spheres adds little to our understanding of gender relations at this period in history.⁴² For one thing, southern plantation homes were a site of labor – of labor accomplished by enslaved outsiders – and thus not fully private and isolated from work and toil.⁴³ Furthermore, as husbands received guests to seal credit agreements, land transactions, or crop sales, wives would have become increasingly familiar with

³⁹ Gail Terry Gail S. Terry, "Family Empires: A Frontier Elite in Virginia and Kentucky, 1740-1815" (College of William & Mary, 1992), 128. Sturtz, *Within Her Power: Propertied Women in Colonial Virginia*, 79.

⁴⁰ Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War*, 28.

⁴¹ William Preston to Susanna Smith Preston, 9 July 1777, transcribed by Patricia Givens Johnson in *William Preston and the Allegheny Patriots* (Pulaski, VA: Smith & Bros Printers Inc, 1976), 198-199; Susanna Smith Preston to William Preston, 29 August 1778, *William Preston and the Allegheny Patriots*, 211.

⁴² For an argument against the restrictive dualism of the application of the separate spheres doctrine to historical scholarship, see Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (June 1988): esp. 37-39.

⁴³ Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2-3, 38, 43.

the commercial world.⁴⁴ For instance, William Preston not only conducted agricultural transactions in his plantation home of Smithfield but also established there a Land Office in his capacity as head surveyor of Montgomery County.⁴⁵ Even when William was home, there were likely opportunities for Susanna to become acquainted with various aspects of William's estate management.

Putting much emphasis on executorship as shaping widow's position, historians have interpreted a man's decision in selecting his spouse as executrix as a measure of his regard – or lack thereof – for his wife and his estimation of her capacities in understanding complex financial and legal operations. Within this framework, broader executorship trends thus provide evidence as to contemporary expectations about gender roles.⁴⁶ Ultimately, however, even had William left additional documents explaining the rationale behind the drafting of his will, he might not have discussed all concerns, goals, and values that consciously and unconsciously factored in the testamentary arrangements he made. The role Susanna played in informing William's testamentary provisions also remains obscure. Susanna did not sign the will as a witness, but she might have participated in the drafting of the will or at least been aware of its content. That Jane Buchanan, the couple's adoptive daughter who lived at Smithfield with the family until her marriage in 1778, witnessed the 1777

⁴⁴ Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War*, 19.

⁴⁵ Plat Books Index in folder "Preston Family Records in the Montgomery County Courthouse," Preston Family Papers - Alice Moore Collection, Virginia Tech Library.

⁴⁶ Conger, *The Widows' Might: Widowhood and Gender in Early British America*, 101. Lorena Walsh, and Lois Green Carr, "The Planter's Wife: The Experience of White Women in Seventeenth-Century Maryland," *William and Mary Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (1977): 555. Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860*, 36, 120.

testament suggests it might have been signed at the main plantation home.⁴⁷

Reconstructing one historical reality from a limited range of archival documents makes silences, elisions, and gaps plain. As such, microhistorical scholarship engages with avenues of possibilities.⁴⁸ We can only speculate about why it made sense to William, maybe in concert with Susanna, to name his two eldest sons and two nephews as the official managers of his estate, while excluding his wife.

That William did not name Susanna executrix could be a reflection of her husband's acknowledgement not necessarily of Susanna's lack of skills, but of his community's reluctance and discomfort to engage in various kinds of transactions with women who had attained a position of economic leverage. In the eighteenth-century Virginia economy, gentry families such as the Prestons engaged in intricate networks of credits and debts, deriving considerable socio-economic power from their control of other people's debts and agricultural output.⁴⁹ Merchants extended credit for consumer goods based on the buyer's agricultural production – mostly in the form of tobacco bonds.⁵⁰ For the settlement of William's estate, this meant a series of major financial transactions convincing debtors to effectuate payment in order for the estate to afford to reimburse William's own debts. For example, in a letter dated October 31st 1783, John Preston exhorted a debtor of the estate, Thomas Anderson, to pay back

⁴⁷ "The Will of Colonel William Preston," 70. Letitia Preston Floyd to Rush Floyd, 22 February 1843. "Part 2," 43.

⁴⁸ Muir, "Introduction: Observing Trifles," xviii-xix.

⁴⁹ Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia: 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 133.

⁵⁰ Martin, *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia*, 72-73.

a bond for 25,000 pounds of tobacco.⁵¹ William might have feared that debtors and creditors would not take Susanna's demands seriously enough in the context of such voluminous transactions.

Instead, William chose as his executors four men whose standing in the community commanded respect, who were already obliged to him through familial ties and past assistance, and who mastered the intricacies of the legal system. As sons John (b. 1764) and Francis (b.1765) were still relatively young when William wrote his will in 1777 and his codicil in 1781, William stipulated that, when John was to reach twenty years of age and Francis, nineteen, "they are to act [as executors] but not without the direction, advice & council of my other executors," their older cousins John Brown (1757-1837) and John Breckinridge (1760-1806). While Susanna might have acquired ad hoc legal knowledge relating to William's business and estate, all of William's four executors already had completed or would complete in the years following his death formal legal education. This characteristic shared by all executors was crucial, since even widows acting as executrixes often consulted lawyers not only to become acquainted with procedural intricacies but also to give their enterprise an aura of legitimacy.⁵² According to Rhys Isaac, "the law was the most valued branch of higher earning in this society of assertive, litigious landowners."⁵³ Expressing the value placed on legal knowledge by eighteenth-century communities, John wrote to his brother Francis that his "long absence from this country" while studying law in Williamsburg "makes many people anxious for your return, some expecting to profit

⁵¹ John Preston to Thomas Anderson, 31 October 1783, Preston Family Papers, VHS.

⁵² Snyder, *Brabbling Women: Disorderly Speech and the Law in Early Virginia*, 117-18.

⁵³ Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia: 1740-1790*, 133.

from your knowledge.”⁵⁴ Both John and Francis completed a law license at the College of William & Mary in the 1780s. Montgomery records indicate that, by 1785, John was serving as justice on the county court.⁵⁵

Experience in the county court and the militia ensured that sons John and Francis built relations of trust with many members of their community with whom they would have to interact for estate business in ways that were impossible for Susanna, as a woman, to do. John and Francis prepared for occupying a position in society similar to that of their father and gradually became acquainted with the duties of plantation masters and local leaders. In 1780, sixteen-year-old John was already involved in managing the plantation’s agricultural output as he signed an order to the Horseshoe plantation overseer John Champ, asking him to deliver a barrel of corn to a certain James Sunday.⁵⁶ As a general rule, fathers were more likely to entrust their wives with the ownership and management of the estate if their children were still young than if they had prior experience in conducting business.⁵⁷ The day William passed away, his son John was accompanying him on a regimental muster and caught him as he collapsed.⁵⁸ In February 1784, John Preston earned the title of Captain of the county militia while Francis was appointed lieutenant.⁵⁹ By involving his teenaged sons in militia musters that hierarchically bound neighbors together and that fostered

⁵⁴ John Preston to Francis Preston, 26 December 1786, Preston Family Papers, College of William & Mary Library.

⁵⁵ Montgomery County Court Minutes, 25 January 1785, in *Annals of Southwest Virginia*, 779.

⁵⁶ John Preston to John Champ, order for delivery of crops, Preston Family Papers, VHS.

⁵⁷ Sturtz, *Within Her Power: Propertied Women in Colonial Virginia*, 22.

⁵⁸ Letitia Preston Floyd to Rush Floyd, 22 February 1843, “Part 1,” 14.

⁵⁹ Montgomery County Court Minutes, 29 November 1785, in *Annals of Southwest Virginia, 1769-1800 (Part 1)*, ed. Lewis Preston Summers (Baltimore: Genealogical Pub. Co., 1970), 816.

respect within the community, William trained them to a key public performance of their elite status in the county.⁶⁰

John Breckinridge and John Brown had also acquired respectable credentials in the years prior to William's death that favorably positioned them as men of trust. Son of William's sister Letitia and Robert Breckinridge, John Breckinridge grew up a protégé of his uncle. In the late 1770s, John taught his younger cousins at Smithfield plantation and "greatly assisted" his uncle with surveying and maintaining his vast network of correspondence with revolutionaries across Virginia.⁶¹ By the time William named John an executor to his estate in his 1781 codicil, John had already acquired considerable clout despite his young age, and owed much to his uncle. In 1780, he successfully underwent surveying examinations at the College of William & Mary, after which his uncle appointed him as deputy surveyor of Montgomery County. The year 1780 also marked John's first election to Virginia House of Delegates, in which he twice represented Botetourt County, and the beginning of his legal studies under George Wythe.⁶² John Breckinridge frequently appears alongside John and Francis Preston in county court records as William's witnesses for deeds signed for the estate of James Patton, William's uncle. This suggests William might have seen his duty as executor for his uncle's estate as a way to familiarize the future executors of his own estate with the kind of work implied in executorship. It was also

⁶⁰ Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 277-81.

⁶¹ Letitia Preston Floyd to Rush Floyd, 22 February 1843, "Part 1," 13.

⁶² Lowell H. Harrison, *John Breckenridge: Jeffersonian Republican* (Louisville: The Filson Club, 1969), 4-7.

crucial to acquaint the young men with the details of the Patton estate since William's death implicated them in the executorship of this estate as well.⁶³ For his part, son of William's sister Margaret and Reverend John Brown, John Brown completed his law degree at the College of William & Mary in 1779-1780 and also acted as a political representative for the inhabitants of the Virginia backcountry, serving in the Virginia Senate from 1784 to 1788.⁶⁴ He grew up farther away from the Prestons than John Breckinridge, but emotional strong ties connected the Browns and the Prestons.⁶⁵

When designating his executors, William wrote of the "necessity of troubling some of my friends & relations," of placing a "burden" on their shoulders, and of "the expense and trouble" this responsibility will "necessarily" entail. Having served as executor for a number of his kinsmen, notably his uncle James Patton (d. 1755), the Colonel John Buchanan (d. 1769), and his brother-in-law Robert Breckenridge (d. 1773), William was well aware that the settling of complex estates could require decades of legal procedures and efforts to track down debtors.⁶⁶ Botetourt county

⁶³ For John Breckenridge, and John and Francis Preston acting as witnesses, see Deeds of Lease and Release 17-18 May 1780, 24 October 1781, 28 January 1783, 1-2 May 1783, in *Montgomery County Deed Book A, 1773-1789*, compiled by James L. Douthat (Tennessee: Mountain Press, 1987), 50, 64, 68-69. For John and Francis Preston, John Breckenridge, and John Brown acting as executors of the Patton estate, see Deeds of Lease and Release 2-3 July 1784, in *Montgomery County Deed Book A*, 72. See also Montgomery County Briefs of Deeds 9 October 1793 and 6 May 1800, in *Annals of Southwest Virginia*, 923, 939.

⁶⁴ John Frederick Dorman, *The Prestons of Smithfield and Greenfield in Virginia: Descendants of John and Elizabeth (Patton) Preston through Five Generations* (Louisville: Filson Club, 1982), 40-41.

⁶⁵ Reverend John Brown, John's father, appear to have been a close confidant to William Preston, as suggested by their long correspondence. For instance, the Reverend wrote after the passing of William and Susanna's daughter Ann Nancy: "The tye of nature and relationship that for so many years have linked and glewed our affections so intimately cannot but beget a tender sympathy in me [...] and makes me say of every affliction which befalls you, a part is mine." John Brown to William Preston, 7 March 1782. Anna Whitehead Kenney Papers, 1965-1972, Virginia Tech Library. Typescript. Original in the Draper Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.

⁶⁶ Reading of the last will & testament of Robert Breckenridge, Botetourt County Court Minutes, 11 November 1773, in *Annals of Southwest Virginia*, 212; Will of John Buchanan, 5 June 1769, Campbell-

records show William signing deeds of lands for the estate of Patton twenty-five years after the latter's death.⁶⁷ Perhaps in concert with his wife, William might have estimated that the duties of executorship would overburden Susanna, who also had to superintend the raising of numerous minor children.⁶⁸ As William was writing a codicil to his will in 1781, Susanna was pregnant for the eleventh time and was again expecting at the time of his death in 1783. Later on, Susanna's children repeatedly expressed concerns about Susanna's health, which may have already been unstable before her husband's death. Her daughter Eliza worried in 1794 about "her being attacked with one of her violent sick spells, which she so subject to," and John hoped in the summer of 1798 that a trip to the Sweet Springs would "free her from those paroxysms of the sick head and stomach to which she has been always subject."⁶⁹ William and Susanna could have decided that a fragile health, pregnancies, and the rearing of young children constituted important impediments to the performance of the varied duties of executorship.

The management of William's estate indeed proved to involve a significant amount of work for sons John and Francis, helped by the two other executors *and* additional kinsmen. Settling the debts of the estate and supervising land transactions

Preston-Floyd Family Papers, vol. 2; Letitia Preston Floyd to Rush Floyd, 22 February 1843, "Part 1," 11; Minutes of the Botetourt County Court, 12 April 1782, in *Annals of Southwest Virginia*, 354.

⁶⁷ See, for instance, Montgomery County Deed Briefs 10 May 1780, in *Annals of Southwest Virginia*, 565.

⁶⁸ Noting the proportion of men who named their wives among co-executors, Lisa Wilson indicates that many husbands would have considered a full executorship charge too much for their wives, not out of discrimination against their capacity but out of emotional concern for their well-being. *Life after Death: Widows in Pennsylvania, 1750-1850*, 50-53.

⁶⁹ Eliza Preston Madison to Sarah Preston McDowell, 10 January 1794. Smithfield Preston Foundation Papers, 1784-1881. Virginia Tech Library. Transcribed online; John Preston to Francis Preston, 23 July 1798, Floyd-Johnston-Preston Papers, College of William & Mary Library.

across several counties in the Virginia backcountry required time for frequent travels – often unsafe for elite women – as well as to appear to court and manage entangled paperwork over many years. Moreover, William’s responsibilities to tend to the affairs of the Patton, Buchanan, and Breckinridge estates de facto devolved to his own estate’s executors. Sending a book containing land patents for the Buchanan estate to Francis, John Preston conceded in 1798 that dealing with the Buchanan land could be “troublesome” and “disagreeable from the experience I have had of similar kind belonging to that Estate.”⁷⁰ The deed records of Washington Co. court show John Preston, Francis Preston, John Breckinridge, and John Brown acting in 1799 in a land transfer case related to the Buchanan estate by way of the Preston executorship, thirty years after Buchanan’s death.⁷¹ John admitted that once all estates to which he had to attend would be settled, “I shall feel extremely lightened indeed & believe it will give much satisfaction to all concerned.”⁷² A testimony to the sheer length of time required to settle such large estates, Francis Preston and Nathaniel Hart were still pursuing the debt owed by the Howard family to William’s heirs in 1833, a few years after John Preston’s death and fifty years after William’s.⁷³

At the core of land and debt settlements for complex estates like William’s stood records of prior acquisitions and transactions that constituted proofs for claims

⁷⁰ John Preston to Francis Preston, 21 May 1798, Preston Family Papers, College of William & Mary Library.

⁷¹ John Preston, Francis Preston, John Breckenridge, and John Brown, deed, 2 November 1799, in *Washington County Virginia Deed Book 2 (1797-1802)*, abstracted and indexed for the Historical Society of Washington Co. VA by Jack and Rubiette Niemann (Athens, GA: New Papyrus Publishing, 2005), p. 223.

⁷² John Preston to Francis Preston, 6 January 1802, Preston Family Papers, College of William & Mary Library.

⁷³ Francis Preston, memoranda book about the Preston estate written in 1833-1834, pp. 39. Preston Family Papers – Gray Collection, FHS.

against other estates or in defense of an estate. William's executors thus had to manage piles of land records going back to the early years of the wealthy surveyor's business. Letters exchanged between John and Francis expressed concerns about regrouping the documents needed. In 1802, John planned to devote the entire month of January, which was "unfavourable to leaving home," to "arranging the old papers belonging to the different Estates to which we are Executors."⁷⁴ Years later, after Francis requested some of their father's papers, John realized they remained in a trunk at Horseshoe plantation and tried "taking them out & arranging them properly."⁷⁵ The concentration of crucial family papers in the hands of John and Francis could have limited Susanna's access to knowledge about ongoing land claims and estate business in the later years of her widowhood. However, due to the location of William's land office at the family's main plantation house, Smithfield, there is some indication that the women of the family, Susanna included, long had access to significant documents. While corresponding in 1844 with historian Lyman C. Draper who worked on the history of western expansion, William and Susanna's daughter Letitia explained that William's "Letters were all Labeled and carefully put away in a Room attached to the Surveyors Office. After learning to read [...] it was my constant habit to read those Letters."⁷⁶

⁷⁴ John Preston to Francis Preston, 6 January 1802, Preston Family Papers, College of William & Mary Library.

⁷⁵ John Preston to Francis Preston, 9 September 1815, Preston Family Papers, College of William & Mary Library.

⁷⁶ Letitia Preston Floyd to Lyman C. Draper, 30 September 1844, transcribed in Jim Glanville, and Ryan Mays, "A Sketch of Letitia Preston Floyd and Some of Her Letters," *The Smithfield Review: Studies in the History of the Region West of the Blue Ridge* 19 (2015): 108.

Due to the amount of work involved in settling an estate while the young men were still studying or holding political offices, the four executors of William's estate also delegated duties to trusted relatives. For instance, in September 1784, John Preston decided to grant power of attorney to John Breckinridge's brothers Alexander, living in Jefferson Co., and James, in Botetourt Co., to "act on the properties in those counties belonging to the estate in partnership with myself."⁷⁷ More than thirty years later, after a family meeting to discuss the future of the estate's management, the executors charged Col. George Hancock, father of Susanna's daughter-in-law Caroline, and Col. James McDowell, husband of Susanna's daughter Sarah, with the responsibility to sell Preston family lands in Botetourt Co. Hancock and McDowell lived there, were "acquainted with almost every one in it," and would "have a better chance to meet with purchasers than any other we could think of."⁷⁸ Based in Lexington, Kentucky, Nathaniel Hart, husband of Susanna's daughter Susanna, paid taxes on estate lands in Kentucky and sued debtors on behalf of the heirs in regional courts.⁷⁹ The settling of William's estate thus involved significant time investment and travels over decades, so much so that the four executors turned to other kinsmen for assistance. William, or William and Susanna in concert, may have deemed executorship in its traditional legal form an unsuitable mandate for the mother of

⁷⁷ Preston Power of Attorney Deed, 22 September 1784, in *Montgomery Deed Book A*, 74.

⁷⁸ Francis Preston to George Hancock, 9 October 1806, Preston Family Papers – typescript in Davie Collection and original in Joyes Collection, Filson Historical Society.

⁷⁹ Nathaniel Hart to Francis Preston, 29 October 1802 and 28 November 1803, Preston Family Papers – Gray Collection, Filson Historical Society. Francis Preston, "Nathaniel Hart account with the executors of William Preston Deceased, 1800-1834" in memoranda book about the Preston estate written in 1833-1834, pp. 58-61. Preston Family Papers – Gray Collection, Filson Historical Society, Louisville.

several young children who was prone to bouts of illness and who had to tend to the daily management of a plantation home.

While technically limited by the influence granted to the estate's executors, Susanna nonetheless exercised significant leadership in the management, development, and distribution of the estate, thanks to both special clauses in her husband's will and her own initiative. According to inheritance laws and customs, it was within the executors' purview to allocate to heirs the appropriate share of the patrimony.⁸⁰ While William denied Susanna the official title of executrix, the terms of his will allowed her to participate in the distribution of the estate's slaves and some of its land tracts, balancing in some instances the consent of his wife and executors. For example, William specified that, in the event that their sale was not required to cover taxes and debts, the tract of land called Carvins Cove and the remaining of his possessions in the Kentucky lands should be "disposed of amongst my children as my wife thinks proper with the advice & consent of a majority of my Executors."⁸¹ Unfortunately, no records could be located to evaluate if this provision translated into input from Susanna in the settlement of his estate. The Kentucky lands seem to have mostly involved the men of the family. In 1833, Francis recalled that, in the years following his father's death, executors John Brown, John Breckenridge, who moved in Kentucky in 1792, and John Preston, who "went several times to Kentucky at considerable hazard," tried to appropriate for the family estate the land plots claimed

⁸⁰ Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860*, 37.

⁸¹ "The Will of Colonel William Preston," 1781 Codicil, 73.

by William in the emerging western state, but lost many tracts of land due to “trouble, Indians, and confusion of [Kentuckian] laws.”⁸² In the aftermath of the revolutionary war, the rush of settlers to western lands, often squatters with no legal entitlement to the land, complicated official land policy, challenged the claims of proprietors, and caused violence to Native American groups.⁸³

A more revealing case is William’s provision that the executors, *with the consent of his wife*, could calibrate the portions allocated to daughters if one was found at a disadvantage.⁸⁴ Though not naming her executrix, William’s will thus identified ways in which Susanna could act as a decision-maker. On August 24th 1797, William’s heirs signed a deed to grant Susanna and William’s youngest daughter Peggy, born after her father’s death and unaccounted for in his last codicil, a share of William’s still undivided property roughly equal to that of her siblings.⁸⁵ This arrangement apparently did not fully satisfy Susanna, who decided to craft a deed of relinquishment of her own on August 29th of the same year. In it, she transferred claims to her share of her father Francis’ not-yet-apportioned estate, including both real and personal property, to her youngest daughter “in consideration of natural affection “ and “being fearful of accident” that might leave the teenaged Peggy in poor financial standing.⁸⁶ Susanna thus stepped in to ensure all her children were

⁸² Francis Preston, memoranda book about the Preston estate written in 1833-1834, pp. 22-23. Preston Family Papers – Gray Collection, Filson Historical Society, Louisville.

⁸³ Rohrbough, *The Land Office Business: The Settlement and Administration of American Public Lands, 1789-1837*, 6-7.

⁸⁴ “The Will of Colonel William Preston,” 1781 codicil, 73.

⁸⁵ Certified copy of 24 August 1797 deed. Campbell-Preston-Floyd Family Papers, vol. 2.

⁸⁶ Deed of Relinquishment, 29 August 1797, transcript in folder “Preston Family Records in Montgomery County Courthouse,” Anna Whitehead Kenney Papers.

properly provided for, perhaps in fear that her daughter Peggy might not encounter good marriage prospects if she had little to offer. In 1803, with the money she acquired as an heiress after the apportionment of her father's estate, Susanna chose to acquire a number of slaves and other, unspecified "property" for Peggy and her new husband. Significantly, the timing of this bequest to her daughter and son-in-law corresponds not only to when Susanna could access funds from her father's estate, but also "at or about the time of their marriage," which again highlights the crucial importance of property in marriage arrangements.⁸⁷ That Susanna decided to purchase slaves from her inheritance funds also underscores the perceived value of this specific kind of property for new wives setting up a plantation household.

Susanna also sought to benefit the women of her family through her own testamentary provisions. Her 1817 will and 1822 codicil named no male heir. Instead, Susanna directed that her shares at the Virginia Bank, her furniture, cutlery, mourning rings, and livestock be divided among her daughters, granddaughters, and kinswomen according to specific instructions. Susanna's sons were by then well-established masters of their own households. Susanna might have felt little remorse, then, to not consider them in her will.⁸⁸ Interestingly, Susanna bequeathed "all my Stock of cattle and oxen which I may die in possession of on the Smithfield plantation" to her daughter-in-law Ann Taylor Preston, the wife of her son James, who inherited from

⁸⁷ Agreement between the heirs of William Preston re. a bequest by Susanna Smith Preston to John Preston and Peggy Preston Brown, Preston Family Papers – Gray Collection, Filson Historical Society, Louisville.

⁸⁸ Conger argues that "having independent sons freed widows to be more generous to their daughters" and notes that female testators often lived older than male testators, thus the higher proportion of female testators who had well-established sons. *The Widows' Might: Widowhood and Gender in Early British America*, 88-89.

William the legal title to Smithfield.⁸⁹ Susanna must have known that, under the law of coverture, it would actually be Ann's husband who would control the profits from the farm animals. She nonetheless named Ann in her will, perhaps because she had forged a special bond with her daughter-in-law, or perhaps because she felt that property brought into marriage gave covert women some degree of influence in economic discussions with their husbands.⁹⁰

Though family correspondence demonstrates that Susanna remained in frequent contact with her sons, it also hints at the close ties connecting Susanna with her female kin after the beginning of her widowhood. In her exploration of the formation of elite Virginians' identities along the axes of race, gender, and class, historian Kathleen Brown has observed that colonial women, denied access to the male homosocial public culture of militias, court days, taverns, and business dealings, created a localized, domestic homosocial culture of their own. Distancing themselves from the enslaved women who shared their domestic spaces, southern white women looked to a restricted circle of white female kin and friends from corresponding social milieus in forming their sense of themselves along gendered and racial lines.⁹¹

While Susanna lived later than the women studied by Brown, her female relations likewise occupied an important place in her social and familial life, which

⁸⁹ Being hers to pass on in her will, the livestock did not belong to the estate. I have not found details as to how she acquired the livestock over the years. Last Will and Testament of Susanna Smith Preston, 10 December 1817, and Codicil, 23 February 1822, transcripts, Anna Whitehead Kenney Papers.

⁹⁰ Wood has identified widows' recognition of "their emotional investment in other women" as a factor shaping their testamentary provisions. *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War*, 135.

⁹¹ Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia*, 249, 85, 91, 301.

may explain Susanna's commitment to passing her property along to her kinswomen. In a 1794 letter, Eliza pleaded her sister Sarah to visit their mother in Montgomery Co, being "exceedingly uneasy about my dear Mother since I have been informed of . Letitia's intention to remain in Kentucky this winter, her lonely situation is forever before me." Revealing the importance of female kin to Susanna's emotional wellbeing, Eliza insisted that "perhaps your Company will never be more necessary, for I do not recollect that [she was] ever so destitute before – though I h[ope to] believe that Nancy Preston will do everything in her power to render her time comfortable."⁹² Throughout the years of Susanna's widowhood, Smithfield acted as a central space anchoring the feminine bonds between Susanna, her daughters, and her daughters-in-law. Susanna's widowed daughter Eliza lived nearby and often gave news of her mother to her siblings, indicating she often visited her mother's residence.⁹³ Following the death of Susanna's son Thomas in 1812, his widow Edmonia lived at Smithfield several years.⁹⁴ After her marriage to Dr. John Floyd, whose career brought him to Louisville, Lexington, and Christiansburg, daughter Letitia gave birth to three of her children at her mother's plantation, perhaps seeking reassurance and safety in the presence of her mother and kin at a moment of great stress.⁹⁵

⁹² Eliza Preston Madison to Sarah Preston McDowell, 10 January 1794. Smithfield Preston Foundation Papers, 1784-1881. Virginia Tech Special Collections, Blacksburg. Transcribed online.

⁹³ Dorman, *The Prestons of Smithfield and Greenfield in Virginia: Descendants of John and Elizabeth (Patton) Preston through Five Generations*, 48.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 72.

⁹⁵ Glanville, "A Sketch of Letitia Preston Floyd and Some of Her Letters," 81.

Susanna's bequests, though much more modest than the land and slaves provided for by William's will, held great significance for her female kin, as suggested by a chancery case brought forth by her daughter Letitia in 1848. For the executorship of her estate, Susanna replicated the trends of male testators and chose her sons Francis and James. Perhaps not considering Susanna's humble estate worthy of their time, especially since they were not to directly inherit anything, Francis and James declined to serve as executors, after which "the sisters wished Mrs [Eliza] Madison the eldest of the Sisters to administer on the Estate." Francis nonetheless moved to benefit from her mother's property by buying out his sisters' bank stocks. Only Letitia refused to sell her share to her brother and "often applied," and often without success, to Eliza to receive her interests on the stocks. Years later, after Eliza died, Letitia sued Eliza's executors and was awarded \$218.38. In 1845 a letter to her lawyer, Letitia claimed that her own husband "never exercised any ownership of my Mothers Legacy" and then delineated all the actions she undertook, mostly writing to various family members, to collect her part of the inheritance.⁹⁶ Susanna bequeathed no real estate, but the personal property she had to distribute visibly held meaning for her daughter Letitia.

Overall, Susanna's testamentary decisions highlight broader patterns. Indeed, widows in early America overwhelmingly chose female heirs for their property, a tendency partly explained by the fact that most of this bequeathed patrimony consisted of gendered household items such as textiles and kitchenware aligning with women's

⁹⁶ Cited in *ibid.*, 103-04, 11.

prescribed realms of activity.⁹⁷ And yet, Susanna specifically decided to give items that were not ideologically associated with femininity, such as bank shares and farm animals, to women. Suzanne Lebsock conceptualizes women's attitude towards property in antebellum Virginia as "personalism." In the process of writing a will, this translated into "highly personalized" documents that recognized the value of certain relationships and refuted the principle of equality enshrined by law.⁹⁸ That Susanna decided to bequeath gendered items such as bank shares and farm animals to the women of her family can be interpreted as a device to ensure the prosperity of women she felt emotionally close to, and as a statement of the value of women's involvement in various aspects of a familial estate beyond gender expectations.

Over the forty years of her widowhood, Susanna further shaped the familial patrimony through her control over the estate's slaves. William's will granted Susanna the responsibility for giving each of their children, after reaching adulthood or contracting marriage, "such part of my slaves & stocks or money in lieu thereof as she with the advice & council of my executors [...] thinks just & reasonable." William further stipulated that Susanna should "give rather sparingly until she is convinced of their [children's] frugality," opening the door for Susanna to delay the allocation of such personal property to William's heirs.⁹⁹ In revolutionary and antebellum South,

⁹⁷ Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860*, 135. Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War*, 134.

⁹⁸ Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860*, 112, 36.

⁹⁹ "The Will of Colonel William Preston," 63.

men writing testament typically showed great precision as to the timing and quantity of property to be bestowed to each heir.¹⁰⁰ William's provisions for land transfers, but not for slave bequests, conformed to this trend. Illustrating the potential extent of a widow's leeway in interpreting her husband's testamentary provisions, Susanna held on to some of the estate's slaves until her death, distributed many of them much after her children reached adulthood, and in the meantime sought to maximize profits from the slaves' labor through hiring them out to members of her community.

In the first two decades of her widowhood, Susanna only gave one or two slaves to each child when attaining majority until she apportioned fifteen additional slaves among her children in 1806.¹⁰¹ The 1810 Virginia census attributes to Susanna twenty slaves, more than her son James' thirteen. According to the census, only four men in the entire county, one of whom was her prosperous son John, had more slaves in their household than she did. Although Susanna could not claim absolute ownership of the estate's slaves, who ultimately belonged to the couple's adult children, Susanna thus controlled a greater labor force than the vast majority of the county's heads of households.¹⁰² The situation seems to have bothered her eldest son John, perhaps desirous of inheriting more slaves. Professing concerns for his mother's fragile health, John wrote to Francis after a visit to Smithfield that "her family of negroes is too large

¹⁰⁰ Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War*, 31.

¹⁰¹ Terry, "Family Empires: A Frontier Elite in Virginia and Kentucky, 1740-1815," 151.

¹⁰² *The 1810 Virginia Census Montgomery County Transcribed from the Original by John Vogt*. Georgia: Iberian Publishing/New Papyrus Publishing, 2009. Absolute ownership over a title of property means the owner could sell it or pass it on to heirs. While William had fully owned the slaves in legal terms, like most male heads of household, Susanna as a widow only had a life interest in the slaves' labor.

very inattentive & really an incumbrance to her.” In order to “devert her attention from such concerns & lessons thereby her anxiety & perhaps prolong her life,” John suggested to Francis meet him at Smithfield “for no other purpose than the above.”¹⁰³ In 1816, the Preston thus convened at Smithfield for a second meeting following the 1806 gathering to see to the distribution of additional slaves from the estate.

The unfolding of the two meetings regarding the allocation of William’s slaves shows the complexity of family dynamics involved in this facet of estate management upon which William had given little details in his will. Francis wrote that it was “at the wish of my mother” that heirs first met in 1806 to discuss not only slave property but the remaining land claims and debts to settle, suggesting Susanna was aware of the then-stalling state of estate business and of the disputes between her sons regarding some land plots.¹⁰⁴ Francis’ memoranda book lists the “negroes given to her sons & daughters by my mother and which were valued by the heirs present when the compromise was entered into” and the “the negroes retained by my mother at the compromise for her use & support.” The value of each slave varied according to gender, age, and physical condition. Strikingly, the total value for the slaves received by Susanna’s daughters and respective husbands amounts to 1130 dollars, for an average of 188 dollars per daughter. The cumulative value of the slaves Susanna’s sons received only totals 380 dollars, for an average of 76 dollars per son.¹⁰⁵ Francis

¹⁰³ John Preston to Francis Preston, 2 March 1815. Preston Family Papers – Gray Collection, Filson Historical Society, Louisville. Also partly cited in Terry, “Family Empires: A Frontier Elite in Virginia and Kentucky, 1740-1815,” 151.

¹⁰⁴ Francis Preston, memoranda book about the Preston estate written in 1833-1834, pp. 23-24. Preston Family Papers – Gray Collection, Filson Historical Society, Louisville.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

did not include any discussion of the decision-making process behind such a distribution, but such a disproportionate bequest on the Preston girls could again reflect Susanna's commitment to ensuring the economic wellbeing of her now-married daughters. There is also no mention of special provisions to dedicate the slaves to the covert women's use and not to their husbands, but the very act of bringing property from their birth family into the marriage may have given economic leverage to Susanna's daughters within their respective households.

Now in her mid-seventies, Susanna may have also initiated the second meeting in 1816, perhaps agreeing with John's assessment that her age and health did not remain conducive to the supervision of an important labor force. Nathaniel Hart joined in John's opinion when he wrote to William Jr. about the soon to be held meeting "I expect your mother wishes to give up the balance of the property in her hands, this I have no doubt to her would be a great relief to her" – or at the very least to William's heirs.¹⁰⁶ While Francis' account of the 1806 meeting only mentions slaves "given" to heirs, the outcome of the 1816 meeting was a complicated sale of eighteen slaves to James McDowell, husband of daughter Sarah, and John Floyd, husband of daughter Letitia, for a 6324 dollar bond to the estate. McDowell and Floyd thereafter paid Susanna, for her "support during her life," a four percent interest on that bond amounting to 250 dollars per year and were bound to start reimbursing all heirs twelve months after Susanna's death. The agreement signed by the male heirs and the daughters' husbands planned a sale only if "a division & allotment cannot be

¹⁰⁶ Nathaniel Hart to William Preston, 28 July 1816, Preston Family Papers – Joyce Collection, Filson Historical Society, Louisville.

agreed on” by all. The occurrence of a sale thus hints at further tensions and negotiations about the best course of action.¹⁰⁷ That Susanna received monetary compensation this time for being deprived of a source of labor also suggests an effort to compensate Susanna for property loss and thus abide by the dower rule according to which widows had access to a minimum of a third of her late husband’s property during her lifetime. While the number of estate slaves remained in flux with deaths and births, laws provided Susanna with a lifetime right over at least fourteen of the forty-two inventoried slaves. Upon her death in 1823, Susanna had retained eight slaves from the estate for her own benefit and received substantial payments every year following the 1816 sale.¹⁰⁸

Long entrusted with the slaves that formed such a crucial part of family patrimony, Susanna acted with prudence to minimize risks of losing valuable labor sources, as evidence by one letter exchanged between sons William and John. In 1795, while his younger brother William guarded western regions, John followed up on William’s request for an estate slave to assist him in United States army camps with disappointing news: “Our Mother seems averse to sending you a boy to the Army, apprehending that he will be in danger often times when it will not be in your power to attend to him & also that he may be set at liberty by the Laws of S[outh]W[est] territory.” While the slave’s task would have been to assist William, and not the other way around, John formulated in a quite ironic way Susanna’s

¹⁰⁷ Francis Preston, memoranda book about the Preston estate written in 1833-1834, pp. 53, 68. Preston Family Papers – Gray Collection, Filson Historical Society, Louisville.

¹⁰⁸ An inventory of the personal estate of William Preston deceased as left to Susanna Preston his widow and relict and not inventoried heretofore, 2 January 1826, transcript, Anna Whitehead Kenney Papers.

worries that the slave would run away if not properly supervised. Susanna retained the last word in the matter since John suggested not to try to convince her otherwise or to act without her approval, but to himself buy a slave for William with the money he would make by selling one of his brother's horses.¹⁰⁹ In refusing William's demand for a slave as too risky, Susanna may have acted out of self-interest to retain a larger labor force on the plantation she lived on, or she may have positioned herself as guardian of family property for the common economic benefit of all heirs.

Furthermore, in expressing her fear that the slave "may be set at liberty by the Laws of S[outh]W[est] territory," Susanna demonstrated her engagement with the recent politics and legal framework of slave ownership. Susanna may have heard debates among relatives about policies in the Southwest territory affecting slave-owners, read about it in the newspapers, or been informed by family members. Susanna's sons and daughters created through the exchange of letters and books a network of political and economic information that had bearings on their respective finances and prospects.¹¹⁰ The geographic spread of Preston family members and the distance of many from the main urban centers may have increased their reliance on kin for current information. In 1786, John wrote from Montgomery Co. to his brother Francis, then studying in Williamsburg, that "a small sketch of news political & of

¹⁰⁹ John Preston to William Preston, 23 May 1795, Preston Family Papers – Joyce Collection, Filson Historical Society, Louisville.

¹¹⁰ For instance, John sent to Francis Emer de Vattel's *Law of Nations* and asked Francis to send him Oliver Evans' *Millwright*. John Preston to Francis, 26 July 1792, Floyd-Johnston-Preston Papers; Eliza wrote to Francis's wife Sarah about Francis' electoral politics and tactics of his opponent in various regions, Eliza Preston Madison to Sarah Buchanan Preston, 3 February 1795, Floyd-Johnston-Preston Papers; and John Preston to Francis Preston, 6 November 1799, Preston Family Papers, College of William & Mary.

merchandize, trade prices of country produce, tobacco, hemp etc. will be no unacceptable present to a person who lives as remote as I do.”¹¹¹ A few years later, John planned on sending news “respecting politicks” to Francis as soon as he was to reach Richmond, and forwarded from his trip to Lexington, KY, information about Native American treaties, local militias, and land speculation in the new state.¹¹² Francis also provided his younger brother William with news of domestic and foreign affairs after his election to Congress.¹¹³ Their father William had maintained such a web of relations who provided him with the latest news, newspapers, and publications. While living far from urban centers with his family, William sent lists of books to his brothers-in-law Edward Johnson and Granville Smith, both living in Manchester to procure for him. William also received bundles of newspapers from both men.¹¹⁴ Exemplifying the economy of information that allowed the backcountry elite to engage with colony or state-wide issues, letters sent to William by Edward Johnson also contain information about the regulation of prices of goods in Williamsburg during the Revolutionary War, copies of a Land Act, and thoughts

¹¹¹ John Preston to Francis Preston, 18 May 1786, Floyd-Johnston-Preston Papers, College of William & Mary.

¹¹² John Preston to Francis Preston, 29 September 1792 and 3 May 1793, Floyd-Johnston-Preston Papers, College of William & Mary.

¹¹³ Francis Preston to William Preston, 1 January 1794, Preston Family Papers – Davie Collection, Filson Historical Society, Louisville.

¹¹⁴ Granville Smith to William Preston, 17 January 1776; Edward Johnson to William Preston, 13 February 1776, 31 July 1776, and 16 November 1776, transcripts in Preston Family Papers – Davie Collection, Filson Historical Society, Louisville. Granville Smith was Susanna’s brother and Edward Johnson married Elizabeth Smith, Susana’s sister. Of Scottish origins, Johnston based his merchant trade from Manchester, now part of Richmond. Terry, “Family Empires: A Frontier Elite in Virginia and Kentucky, 1740-1815,” 13.

about the best way to procure land in Kentucky.¹¹⁵ While no letter written directly to or from Susanna remains to connect her to her children's information network, the references to Susanna's discussion of the Southwest territory in John's 1795 letter reveals she was well aware of current policies affecting slave ownership in new western territories.

At least one document indicates that Susanna not only kept slaves for her own plantation activities, but also hired them out occasionally, thereby contributing to the fructification of the estate's income. In 1809, Susanna wrote to a resident of Montgomery Co., Henry Edmundson, inquiring if he was interested in hiring one of her slaves, whose "wife" labored at Edmundson's plantation. Susanna cloaked her request in munificent language, saying that such a transaction would "gratify & quiet" the slave's mind and restore his health, he who had "lost much weight since the separation." Susanna added that Edmundson "knew his value," suggesting Edmundson had previously hired the slave, hence the former's attachment to one of Edmundson's slaves.¹¹⁶ The tone of Susanna's dispatch aligns with the antebellum ideal of the benevolent Southern lady who adopts a motherly attitude towards her slaves, but the content of her request – transacting a human being for money – reveals a deliberate economic strategy borrowed by many slave-owning women, both married

¹¹⁵ See Edward Johnson to William Preston, 24 July 1779 and 29 August 1779, transcripts in Preston Family Papers – Davie Collection, Filson Historical Society, Louisville.

¹¹⁶ Susanna Smith Preston to Henry Edmundson, 21 November 1809, Edmundson Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond. While Susanna used the term "wife," she most likely meant "companion" since formal marriages between slaves in the South were not recognized legally. Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860*, 104.

and widowed, to capitalize on their property in times of low agricultural productivity or economic uncertainty.¹¹⁷

Archival evidence of Susanna's participation in her community's slave market is otherwise fragmentary at best and gives little context surrounding the transactions in slaves in which she was involved. For instance, in an 1807 letter to her son Francis, she simply stated "I have sent the negroes you wrote for at the prices you mentioned."¹¹⁸ This sentence suggests that Francis, entitled to a share of his father's slave labor, might have sought to hire slaves from his mother, to buy more for himself, or to sell at a higher price to someone outside the family, to which Susanna agreed. A more suggestive piece of evidence is an 1806 dispatch to son John in which Susanna discussed a sale of slaves from the estate she planned. She authoritatively mandated John to be present at Smithfield for the transaction so "that there may be no cause of complaint for the future." Leaving no room for refusal and setting the terms of the transaction, she added "you can be here early in the morning."¹¹⁹ Not owning the slaves, Susanna technically needed the consent of the executors and heirs to sell the estate's property, but not their physical presence. Her formulation requesting John's attendance suggests she wanted to allow for no equivocality between John and her about the unfolding of the transaction. It also insinuates that confrontations occurred between them in the past over the appropriate course of action for the management of the estate's labor force.

¹¹⁷ Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War*, 41. Conger, *The Widows' Might: Widowhood and Gender in Early British America*, 92-93.

¹¹⁸ Susanna Smith Preston to Francis Preston, 28 January 1807, Preston Family Papers, VHS.

¹¹⁹ Susanna Smith Preston to John Preston, 26 September 1806, Preston Family Papers – Joyce Collection, Filson Historical Society, Louisville. Scan of the original received by email.

The significance of Susanna's ability to control slave labor extends beyond family and household politics. Debates about the place of women in the American past have often centered on measuring the extent of their autonomy and leadership in comparison to male figures. In the case of a slaveholding widow such as Susanna, the measure of her power should be assessed not only through the lenses of gender relations, but also with regards to race and socio-economic status. As Rhys Isaac has noted, "in Virginia the domination of masters over slaves was the fullest manifestation of social power" because slave ownership was the ultimate means to guarantee the master's freedom from labor and financial constraints, as well as to secure freedom to engage in higher civic and economic pursuits.¹²⁰ Though not their full owner in legal terms, Susanna commanded the labor of a significant number of slaves and decided of their assignment. Control over human – though dehumanized – bodies constituted one substantial realm of control for white female plantation mistresses that fed into contemporary ideological paradigms.¹²¹

Though Susanna participated to making crucial decisions about the whereabouts of estate slaves and gained economic benefits from enslaved workers, the question of how this authority over slaves manifested itself on a daily basis, in its personal interactions, remains complex. As during William's lifetime, overseers continued to supervise field hands on the plantations wherein Susanna resided. As executors of the estate, John and Francis drafted the contract to hire a new overseer for Smithfield plantation in October 1785. Though it gives no indication as to how the

¹²⁰ Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia: 1740-1790*, 132.

¹²¹ Sturtz, *Within Her Power: Propertied Women in Colonial Virginia*, 11, 114.

overseer actually exercised control over slaves on behalf of Susanna and the estate's executors, the contract specified that, to secure agricultural production, the overseer Malcom Hunter was to "have the conducting of [five hands] as he pleases so as to treat them humanely and in a Christian-like manner."¹²² The presence of an overseer on a plantation managed by a woman established both a physical and a psychological distance between a great number of slaves and the mistress, who likely spent most of her time in the great house.

While enslaved labor ensured the daily comfort and economic wellbeing of the Preston family, and though slaves conferred social power onto the widowed Susanna, in one of her rare letters Susanna portrayed the task of supervising slaves herself as an annoyance, a burden. In 1802, Susanna responded to one of her son Francis's letters, which had been delivered from Francis' home in Washington Co. to his mother's residence at Smithfield by the hands of Primus, one of the estate slaves Susanna gave away.¹²³ Susanna complained to her son that having Primus at Smithfield heightened her managerial responsibilities: "I would not wish you to be so indulgent to [Primus] for the future as I am under no promise to him for any more visits until he should be called for, *it would be quite inconvenient for me to keep him having no person to manage those left here.*"¹²⁴ More than suggesting Susanna's reluctance to directly supervise a great number of slaves, this epistolary passage offers a glimpse into the

¹²² Contract between John Preston, Francis Preston, and Malcolm Hunter, 1 October 1785, Preston Family Papers, VHS.

¹²³ Francis Preston, memoranda book about the Preston estate written in 1833-1834, pp. 22-23. Preston Family Papers – Gray Collection, Filson Historical Society, Louisville.

¹²⁴ Susanna Smith Preston to Francis Preston, 31 May 1802, George Frederick Holmes Papers, College of William & Mary Special Collections. The emphasis is mine.

aspirations and hardships of slaves after the death of their legal master. A master's passing greatly increased the likelihood that kinship and emotional ties between slaves of a plantation be broken by distribution of property among heirs or sale to repay debts, resulting in moments of anxiety and insecurity remembered by some former slaves as times of "trouble."¹²⁵ That Susanna accused Francis of being "indulgent" with Primus for visits at Smithfield suggests Primus may have sought opportunities to be reunited with loved ones after his transfer under Francis' authority.

Susanna's worries about the burden of slave supervision resemble later discourses about female mastery at the onset of the Civil War. With men joining the army, some mistresses complained that "managing negroes [is] beyond my power" or that they felt "incompetent" compared to male masters.¹²⁶ Several historians analyzing plantation households have interrogated the gender of racial violence and authority, especially in the context of the Civil War. In the prolonged absence of men from home, could women exert the same degree of authority over slaves as male husbands and overseers, thereby circumscribing risks of rebellious behavior? Drew Gilpin Faust focuses her analysis on testimonies in which mistresses expounded on their feeling of ineptitude towards slave management and emphasizes women's reluctance to use the necessary violence to bend slaves' will.¹²⁷ Dispelling the idea that the absence of men during war caused a "radical disjuncture" in relations between slaves and the master class, Thaviola Glymph rather emphasizes a continuity in mistresses' uses of physical

¹²⁵ Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War*, 37. Wood cites Nancy William's interview with the Virginia Writers' Project.

¹²⁶ Cited in Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 56.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

and psychological violence to control their domestic slaves since long before the war, though mistresses often obscured this violence in their writings in order to conform to prevailing ideas of the delicate Southern lady.¹²⁸ Glymph insists that what historian Nancy D. Berclaw perceives as slave resistance to the lack of authority of female mistresses most often had to do with “the role and status of manager, in and of itself,” not with gender.¹²⁹

When John expressed worries in 1815 that the slaves working at the plantation managed by Susanna were “very inattentive” in the same paragraph as he opinionated Susanna should distribute those slaves to her children, he implied that households led by younger masters would provide a more structured environment for the management of slaves.¹³⁰ Yet, both the Preston men, some of whom had experienced runaway slaves, and the white overseers who worked for Susanna had their share of difficulties in attempting to bend the will of enslaved individuals.¹³¹ From the beginning of her widowhood to 1791, Susanna long “occupied the Horseshoe [plantation] for the benefit of the family” and seemingly managed its entirety, including the parts of the land dedicated to John and Francis in William’s will. After Susanna’s decision to permanently occupy Smithfield plantation, John and Francis sent some of their slaves to “settle” the plantation, which produced a variety of crops

¹²⁸ Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*, 92-93.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 122-23.

¹³⁰ John Preston to Francis Preston, 2 March 1815. Preston Family Papers – Gray Collection, Filson Historical Society, Louisville.

¹³¹ For examples of runaway slaves belonging to Susanna’s son William, see letter to William Preston, 1 October 1814, and Eliza Madison to William Preston, 16 February 1818, Preston Family Papers – Joyes Collection, FHS.

and where worked John Champ, an overseer, and a Mr. Burras.¹³² In 1792, John feared that Horseshoe plantation was being mismanaged by “old fool Burras,” whose “inattention & neglect of the stock is most notorious - & his authority among the hands is quite gone.” Significantly, when John perceived an issue with the supervision of field slaves at Horseshoe, he instructed Francis, who lived further away from the said plantation than Susanna at Smithfield, to “compel” Burras “to do it better or quit.”¹³³ The supervision of field slaves thus largely remained a male concern and prerogative, but also potentially a challenge to white males’ authority. Though Susanna portrayed slave management as a burden in her letter about slave Primus, and though John expressed contemporary visions of male mastery, the problem of authority in plantation slavery defied gender.

As other contemporary women of her ranks, Susanna would have constantly interacted with enslaved cooks, nannies, and other domestic helps. Preston family papers yield little information about the domestic slaves whom Susanna directly supervised as the mistresses of an imposing plantation home. One piece of early twentieth-century family lore about an incident during William’s lifetime lauded the household slaves’ loyalty and devotion to their mistress. The anecdote, however, muted the fractured nature of plantation households. Lucy Preston Beale, a great-granddaughter of Susanna, recounted that thieves invaded Smithfield one night when Susanna had been entrusted with gold belonging to the new state of Virginia while her husband was away. When frightened Susanna rang the bell alerting the household,

¹³² A Statement of Facts Admitted and Agreed to by Francis & William Preston, 17 September 1805, typescript of original in private possession. Preston Family Papers – Davie Collection, FHS.

¹³³ John Preston to Francis Preston, Preston Family Papers, College of William & Mary Library.

“immediately between fifty and one hundred slaves rushed into the house and up the stairs, to rescue their mistress.”¹³⁴ Though slaves provided a presence that was, in the case of this anecdote, celebrated, the plantation houses wherein Susanna lived remained fragmented along racial lines, as is evident in letters discussing Susanna’s sense of loneliness. In the decades following William’s death, Susanna and the Preston family members who remained at Smithfield – all the while many of the sons and daughters moved to various areas of Virginia and Kentucky – suffered “exceedingly of being lonesome & of [the family’s] scattered situation.”¹³⁵ Several letters highlight the discrepancy between the number of people actually present on Smithfield plantation and the select few with whom it was proper for a white mistress to maintain emotional bonds. In 1793, Francis wrote to his brother William that he “came by Smithfield and found the family all well but lonesome though there appears to be at least 50 or 60 whites & blacks on the place”¹³⁶ Years later, commenting on Susanna’s “solitude,” daughter Eliza wrote to son William that Susanna felt lonely as she “has not a white person on the place except Edmonia & her two little children.”¹³⁷ Despite the “familial” aura of the plantation home casted by contemporary domestic

¹³⁴ Cited by Jennie Hodge, “Spring’s Green Peas, Nocturnal Thieves, and Other Family Lore About Susanna Smith Preston,” *The Smithfield Review: Studies in the History of the Region West of the Blue Ridge* 16 (2012): 73-74.

¹³⁵ John Preston to Francis Preston, 10 January 1796, Floyd-Johnston-Preston Papers, College of William & Mary Library.

¹³⁶ Francis Preston to William Preston, 28 May 1793, Preston Family Papers – Davie Collection, FHS.

¹³⁷ Eliza Madison to William Preston, 16 February 1818, Preston Family Papers – Joyes Collection, FHS.

and paternalist ideologies, the plantation home endured as a site of coercion, economic production, and labor conflicts.¹³⁸

In the context of the daily running of her household, Susanna engaged in contractual relations with members of her community in Montgomery Co. in which she exerted authority not only through racial differentiation but also thanks to her socio-economic status as the head of a prosperous plantation complex. While she relied on an overseer for the running of her plantation's agricultural production, she contributed to the high-end decision making about how to profit from this production. Scattered across a few archival repositories, sixteen orders placed by Susanna to the attention of John Champ, the overseer of the Horseshoe plantation where Susanna inherited a life interest in 100 acres, cover the years 1786 to 1797.¹³⁹ In these orders, Susanna specified what kind of crop and what quantity was to be delivered to which buyer. These documents highlight the diversity of crops cultivated on the plantation, such as tobacco, hemp, corn, and flax, and the extent of Susanna's network with more than a dozen different clients in the county.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, Susanna did not always

¹³⁸ Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*, 24. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia*, 267.

¹³⁹ Susanna Smith Preston to John Champ, orders for delivery of crops, 12 April, 23 May, 26 June, 29 September 1786; two orders on 10 March, [unreadable date] March, 13 June 1789; 19 and 20 April 1790; 17 March 1797, Preston Family Papers, "f series," VHS; 15 April 1786, Preston Family Papers - Alice Moore Collection, Virginia Tech; 5 September 1790, Preston Family Papers - Charles P. Didier Collection, Virginia Tech Library; 22 July 1787, 13 June 1788, 2 January 1789, Preston-Radford Papers, University of Virginia Library; "The Will of Colonel William Preston," 1781 codicil, 72.

¹⁴⁰ Susanna's orders at Horse Shoe plantation reflect a broader risk-management strategy of diversification in the Virginia backcountry at the end of the eighteenth century. Many commercial transactions, such as the acquisition of consumer goods, were paid through crops and merchants encouraged farmers and plantation owners to produce various crops valued in the transatlantic market,

operate through the intermediary of her overseers, as demonstrated by a 1793 receipt for 600 pounds of hemp for Matthew Harvey, witnessed by daughter Eliza.¹⁴¹

Additionally, in a 1799 letter written from Smithfield, Eliza informed her brother John that their mother Susanna hired a wagon from a certain Mr. Robinson to send 800 pounds of hemp to an unnamed buyer via John, whom she instructed to secure the payment.¹⁴²

As a wealthy consumer and the mother of a family engaged in agricultural business from Kentucky to the eastern seaboard, Susanna took part in a dynamic web of economic transactions shaped by her geographic location, family network, and status. In addition to her involvement in the local economy through the sale of crops produced on the estate, Susanna maintained commercial relations with merchants in the backcountry to procure desired goods and produce for her household, often through the intermediary of her son John. While her husband lived, Susanna appeared on his merchant accounts since her legal coverture prevented her from contracting debts – though not from influencing what goods her husband should acquire for the household.¹⁴³ As a widow, Susanna kept accounts in her own name with several retailers and artisans. For instance, from 1783 to 1786, Susanna ran an account with Patrick Lockhart, a Botetourt Co. tavern-keeper, merchant, and justice of the peace,

such as hemp. When prices of one crop declined, they could rely on other crops. Martin, *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia*, 96-97.

¹⁴¹ Receipt for Henry Minneck and Matthew Haroy, 7 May 1793, Preston Family Papers, VHS.

¹⁴² Eliza Preston Madison to John Preston, 8 December 1799, transcript. Anna Whitehead Kenney Papers, Virginia Tech Library.

¹⁴³ William Preston, account with Abraham Chrisman, 10 April 1777, Anna Whitehead Kenney Papers, Virginia Tech Library.

for coffee, rum, sugar, hank silk, paper, and other goods.¹⁴⁴ The balance Susanna owed to Matthew Harvey, a Fincastle merchant who sold her cotton, muslin, sugar, rice, and articles of clothing from 1793 to 1797, and to whom Susanna sent hemp, was “received of Mrs. Preston by the hands of Col. John Preston,” paid in pounds and shillings.¹⁴⁵ Additionally, Susanna procured shoes for herself, her young and adult children alike, and some of her slaves from John Wash. While her son John again settled in 1794 the bill for purchases made from 1788 to 1790, Susanna’s account for 1787 bears a note in the back indicating the balance was repaid “by 14^{1/4} bushels of corn” and beef. John Wash later obtained from Susanna’s overseer John Champ half a barrel of corn in April 1790.¹⁴⁶ In the backcountry, where a decentralized exchange economy long cohabited with commercial developments, eighteenth century practices of bookkeeping allowed the flexibility to pay balances in kind, service, and cash over several years.¹⁴⁷ Especially in the tumultuous financial world of the post-revolutionary war years, currency was not always easy to procure. John noted in 1786 that “the great difficulty of procuring cash in this country renders it almost impossible for the most monied men [...] to command L.25 or L.30 upon any notice whatever.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Susanna Smith Preston, account with Pat. Lockhart, 1783-1786, Preston Family Papers, VHS. Lockhart obtained a license to keep an ordinary in 1771 and served in many offices, including Justice of the Peace. Minutes of the Botetourt County Court, 11 October 1771 and 16 May 1788, in *Annals of Southwest Virginia*, 137 and 429.

¹⁴⁵ Susanna Smith Preston, account with Matthew Harvey, 8 May 1797, Preston Family Papers, VHS.

¹⁴⁶ Susanna Smith Preston, accounts with John Wash, 1787 and July 1788 to February 1790; Susanna Smith Preston to John Champ, order on John Wash, 12 April 1790, Preston Family Papers, VHS.

¹⁴⁷ Warren R. Hofstra, *The Planting of New Virginia: Settlement and Landscape in the Shenandoah Valley* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 225, 306-07.

¹⁴⁸ John Preston to Francis Preston, 18 May 1786, Preston Family Papers, College of William & Mary Library.

In Susanna's world, kinship and local networks organized many of the vectors around which goods and produce circulated. At times, merchant accounts implicated several individuals. In addition to listing sewing and clothing items for two daughters and a son, Susanna's 1798-99 account with McHenry & Bratton included "paper & pins" for Henry Edmundson, who later hired an estate slave from Susanna. Here, a member of Susanna's local economic community benefitted from Susanna's connection to traders to get goods, perhaps in repayment of a debt of another kind. Finally, it was John who paid the aforementioned bill in 1800, perhaps as he was travelling near the traders' location.¹⁴⁹ The great mobility of Susanna's sons, who served in county, state, and federal offices, and who often travelled for business, secured Susanna's access to her preferred goods, not always available near her place of residence.

Emerging from the Preston family correspondence is a system of exchange of goods procured in commercial centers and crops produced on various family members' plantations, a system in which Susanna took part. As an example of exchange involving several family members, Francis sent his wagon from his Saltworks plantation to Smithfield, where it "took in there the articles you expected from our mother," as well as bushels of hemp seeds from John at Horseshoe plantation, about six miles west of Smithfield. Francis had also expected more hemp from his sister Eliza.¹⁵⁰ As a multifaceted economic unit, the Preston family

¹⁴⁹ Susanna Smith Preston, account with McHenry and Bratton, 3 December 1799, Preston Family Papers, VHS.

¹⁵⁰ John Preston to Francis Preston, 27 January 1802, Preston Family Papers, College of William & Mary Library.

periodically exchanged salt, hemp, rye, nail rods, and enslaved labor from one plantation to the other.¹⁵¹ Susanna also frequently requested items such as sugar, tea, accessories for gowns, and linen from her son John, who long served as Treasurer of Virginia in Richmond.¹⁵²

As Susanna possessed a life right in a portion of William's estate, she could control the use and sale of the crops produced the land temporarily granted to her on William's estate, but she did not own the land itself. Though significant from a legal point of view, that Susanna was not the owner of Smithfield plantation and parts of Horseshoe plantation seems to have mattered little to members of her community. A 1788 transaction receipt between Susanna's sons William and Francis and four other men specified that the ginseng to be sold to Francis was "to be delivered at Mrs. Preston 's," using the possessive to talk about a plantation from the estate.¹⁵³ Again formulating Susanna's right to the land in a possessive form, a 1809 document crafted by John Taylor, the county's justice of the peace, described a complaint from John Preston about inadequate fences on a "tenement *belonging* to Susanna Preston" on Horseshoe plantation – then occupied by three tenants.¹⁵⁴ Moreover, personal property tax commissioners, often neighbors who personally knew the occupants of the houses they surveyed, alternated between using the legally appropriate designation for the

¹⁵¹ On transactions of produce and John's proposal to hire some of his slaves to Francis for a summer, see John Preston to Francis Preston, 10 May 1802; 19 December 1802; and 22 December 1805, Preston Family Papers, College of William & Mary Library.

¹⁵² Susanna Smith Preston to John Preston, 5 December 1813, Preston Family Papers, VHS; and John Preston to Eliza Madison, 13 October 1812, Preston Family Papers – Davie Collection, FHS.

¹⁵³ Agreement between William Preston, Francis Preston, Francis Irby, Robert Rowland, Edward McDonald, and Jeremiah Bell, 8 July 1788, Campbell-Preston-Floyd Family Papers, vol. 2.

¹⁵⁴ John Taylor, notice to John Wall, Jacob Shull and Andrew McHaffye, housekeepers of Montgomery County, 3 May 1809, Preston Family Papers, VHS.

owners of the Montgomery Co. estate, i.e. “Preston Executors”, and simply putting Susanna’s name as the head of the household and the owner of the slaves, cattle, and other farm animals.¹⁵⁵ Community members’ tendency to view Susanna as in full possession of the Preston estate in Montgomery Co. suggests she inspired a certain measure of authority in ensuring the daily economic wellbeing of Preston plantations.

Closely connected to decisions about the economic management of the estate was Susanna’s contribution to the advancement of her family’s socio-economic standing through her involvement in ensuring proper education for her children. Education constituted a chief family priority for the Prestons and a substantial financial investment. It was a key concern for William that the funds derived from his land after his death provide for a quality education for his sons and daughters. In his will, he expressed his desire that Susanna “superintend the raising & education of her children – particularly her daughters” and that the executors “do all in their power to give my sons a good education.”¹⁵⁶ We can surmise that Susanna played a part in inspiring the commitment William showed in his testament towards his family’s education. Susanna was an unusually well-educated woman considering contemporary standards.¹⁵⁷ Most eighteenth-century girls grew up with no other education than the basic literacy skills members of their family could transmit. In well-to-do southern

¹⁵⁵ While most years tax commissioners designated the executors as the responsible persons for the estate, Susanna was listed for years 1791, 1794, and 1807-1812 in the sample years 1787-1812. Montgomery County Personal Property Tax Records for 1782-1925 on Microfilm, reels 241-242. Library of Virginia, Richmond.

¹⁵⁶ “The Will of Colonel William Preston,” 63, 68.

¹⁵⁷ Osborn, “William Preston of Virginia, 1727-1783: The Making of a Frontier Elite,” 119.

families, girls sometimes benefitted from tutors also educating their brothers, or occasionally attended local schools.¹⁵⁸ Susanna's instructor, Anglican rector Patrick Henry, had completed his education in Scotland in the intellectual atmosphere of the Scottish Enlightenment before migrating to St-Paul's Parish in the Virginia county of Hanover.¹⁵⁹

That William recognized that validity of Susanna's and their daughters' ongoing intellectual pursuits is highlighted by his decision to grant women of his family prime access to his collection of books. In eighteenth-century Virginia, cultural expectations that a woman's proper societal role centered on the raising of her children and the maintenance of a household meant that female intellectual development was generally frowned upon as unnecessary, and even possibly threatening to the status quo.¹⁶⁰ Still, William's will specified that his impressive collection of books – 273 books according to the 1790 inventory – was to be allotted in equal parts to each of his sons “except such as my wife may choose to keep for the use of herself & my daughters.”¹⁶¹ In addition to securing books from friends and kin, William maintained contact with booksellers in Wilmington and Williamsburg, acquiring books on a variety of topics including philosophy, theology, education, and ancient

¹⁵⁸ Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*, 259-61. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia*, 296.

¹⁵⁹ Thomas S. Kidd, *Patrick Henry: First among Patriots* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 2011), 9.

¹⁶⁰ Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 190-91, 235.

¹⁶¹ “The Will of Colonel William Preston,” 66-67. An Inventory and Appraisement of the Estate of William Preston dec'd taken March 1790. Campbell-Preston-Floyd Family Papers, vol. 2.

history.¹⁶² The only known surviving book attributed to William Preston's library, Scottish philosopher James Beattie's 1771 work *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth*, illustrates of the type of books that would have been included in William's book bequest.¹⁶³ Demonstrating the extent to which learning was established as a priority for the whole family, not just for the Preston men, the Preston women thus had access to works discussing a wide range of matters much beyond domestic concerns.

More than denoting his appreciation for the intellectual lives of the women of his family, William's book bequest may also have signified a desire to counterbalance contemporary gender inequalities in educational opportunities. Like Susanna, William's education as a teenager chiefly consisted of private tutorship in grammar, history, and mathematics by a church minister defrayed by William's uncle James Patton. James then encouraged William to continue his education on his own through books.¹⁶⁴ Having risen to the ranks of the Virginia gentry, William could now dedicate sufficient resources to the education of his sons in reputed academies and colleges across Virginia. Not only was formal education for boys of the Virginia elite a marker of select social status, it also served to reinforce unequal gender relations by "impress[ing] upon their sisters early in life a sense of intellectual inferiority" that

¹⁶² Osborn, "William Preston of Virginia, 1727-1783: The Making of a Frontier Elite," 193-94.

¹⁶³ Book with William Preston's signature on the title page. Smithfield-Preston Foundation Collection, exhibited at Smithfield Plantation Home, Blacksburg. Visited on 11 October 2014.

¹⁶⁴ Terry, "Family Empires: A Frontier Elite in Virginia and Kentucky, 1740-1815," 50.

relegated them to domestic preoccupations.¹⁶⁵ It was only after most Preston daughters came of age that the early Republic witnessed increasing public interest in expanding women's schooling through new academies for young girls.¹⁶⁶ While William and Susanna's daughters received an initial education by private tutors, books provided a way to further their knowledge in the absence of opportunities for advanced schooling. Though, as will be discussed below, specific testamentary provisions about his children's education carried important financial implications for the estate and promises of future economic gains for male professions, William's book bequests to his wife and daughters indicates the importance of intellectual legacy within the Preston family beyond economic concerns.

William's will established a gendered division in educational duties, with the executors taking particular care of the sons' learning and the mother, of the daughters' instruction. However, archival documents show that, in reality, the executors' and Susanna's responsibilities overlapped. As prescribed by their father's will, John and Francis indeed closely examined options for their brothers' collegial education and provided them with money from the estate.¹⁶⁷ While at Washington Academy, twenty year-old Thomas sent a note of praise to his brother John: "I have however found in

¹⁶⁵ Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia*, 296-98, 343. See also Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, esp. 191-93.

¹⁶⁶ *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, 193. Judith T. Bainbridge, "A 'Nursery of Knowledge': The Greenville Female Academy, 1819-1854," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 99, no. 1 (1998): 9. An undated bill listing Francis Preston's daughters Eliza Henry Preston, Susan Smith Preston, and Sarah Buchanan Preston as "Scholars" indicates that later generations of Preston women had access to the new academies. Campbell-Preston-Floyd Family Papers, vol. 2.

¹⁶⁷ See John Preston to Francis Preston, 2 November 1786, Preston Family Papers, College of William & Mary Library.

you, not only the love and regard of a brother, but the virtuous admonition, and earnest anxiety, of a Father. Nor was this care confined to a love to me, but extended to all the family.” He then proceeded to beg John for money to continue on an educational path commensurate to the “respectability and wealth of the family.”¹⁶⁸ Though Thomas’ commending tone was surely not disinterested, his letter denotes how John replaced William as the family patriarch in the eyes of the younger Preston children who had little time to know their father. Alternatively, taking responsibility for the Preston girls’ education though the will attributes this task to Susanna, John Preston hired a French tutor for his sisters educated at Smithfield plantation.¹⁶⁹

John’s prominent role in securing adequate instruction for his family did not exclude Susanna from contributing as well. Francis, in Williamsburg for his studies, wrote to John Breckinridge on December 3rd 1784 demanding funds in order to acquire a boy servant to attend him there “if you think it would be no inconvenience for the estate.” Francis then reiterated “I think it would not be disagreeable *to mama or the Executors* to take a small boy of about 12 or 13 at a moderate price,” implying that Susanna could pull the purse’s strings in ways not delineated by William’s will.¹⁷⁰ Later, in 1786, while updating his mother on the progress of his studies and promising that he had “been and intend to be very studious,” Francis took the opportunity to

¹⁶⁸ Thomas Preston to John Preston, 23 May 1801, John Preston Papers. Thomas reiterates his feelings in an April 11, 1807 letter to John in which he wrote “you have taught me by example as well as by precept the way to Virtue.” Preston Family Papers - Charles P. Didier Collection, Virginia Tech Library.

¹⁶⁹ Eliza Preston Madison to Sarah Buchanan Preston, 3 February 1795, Floyd-Johnston-Preston Papers, College of William & Mary Library.

¹⁷⁰ Francis Preston to John Breckenridge, 3 December 1784, John Breckenridge Papers, College of William & Mary Library. Photostats from the Breckenridge Family Papers at the Library of Congress. The emphasis is mine.

solicit “30 pounds from home” to help him pay tuition.¹⁷¹ Beyond financial contributions to her children’s education, Susanna also voiced her opinions about the instruction of the youngest son of the family, Thomas. In a 1799 letter to Francis, John professed his agreement with his mother’s plan that Thomas should first attend Rockbridge Academy to consolidate his knowledge of Latin before moving on to Princeton.¹⁷² Susanna’s assertiveness in discussing higher education, a topic of conversation which was not traditionally within a woman’s purview in colonial America, may stem from both her exceptional degree of instruction and the overture created by the Revolution for women’s contribution to the citizenry’s civic virtue. According to historian Linda Kerber, the Republican Mother contributed to the new nation within the limits imposed by domestic ideology through educating her children, both boys and girls, to become righteous citizens interested in contributing socially and politically to the future of the new country.¹⁷³

In conclusion, Susanna’s experience of widowhood and her involvement in shaping the family’s economic and educational arrangements suggest that Ariela Dubler’s claim that, constrained by the provisions in her husband’s will, a widow continued to operate within “marriage’s shadow” is inadequate.¹⁷⁴ Instead, Susanna operated within a family system in which she had significant leeway in interpreting testamentary provisions and advancing her ideas about the judicious management of

¹⁷¹ Francis Preston to Susanna Smith Preston, 16 February 1786, Preston Family Papers, VHS.

¹⁷² John Preston to Francis Preston, 23 June 1799, Preston Family Papers, VHS.

¹⁷³ Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, 283.

¹⁷⁴ Dubler, “In the Shadow of Marriage: Single Women and the Legal Construction of the Family and the State,” 1658.

the familial estate. While William's will prescribed specific roles for family members to play in the settlement of his estate and in the advancement of his family after his departure, duties and initiatives overlapped, leaving room for Susanna to contribute to the socio-economic well-being of her family in ways William might not have anticipated. Susanna did not act as executrix of the estate, a role reserved for Preston sons and their kin who understood the intricacies of the law and who occupied respected positions within the community. Susanna nonetheless actively shaped the distribution and maintenance of the estate's personal property, especially its slaves, ensured sufficient support for her daughters, contributed to the daily management of the family's plantation, and provided funds and advice to guarantee a quality education for her children.

Relations between legal norms, gender roles, individual actions, socio-economic and racial status, and family systems are intricate and multifaceted. The value of microhistory for the study of widowhood, and gender relations more broadly, is to ground women as historical subjects in their immediate socio-economic environment and to bring to the forefront as much information as possible about how they negotiated the constraints placed upon them and the freedoms granted to them despite the unavoidable elisions and gaps in archival documents.

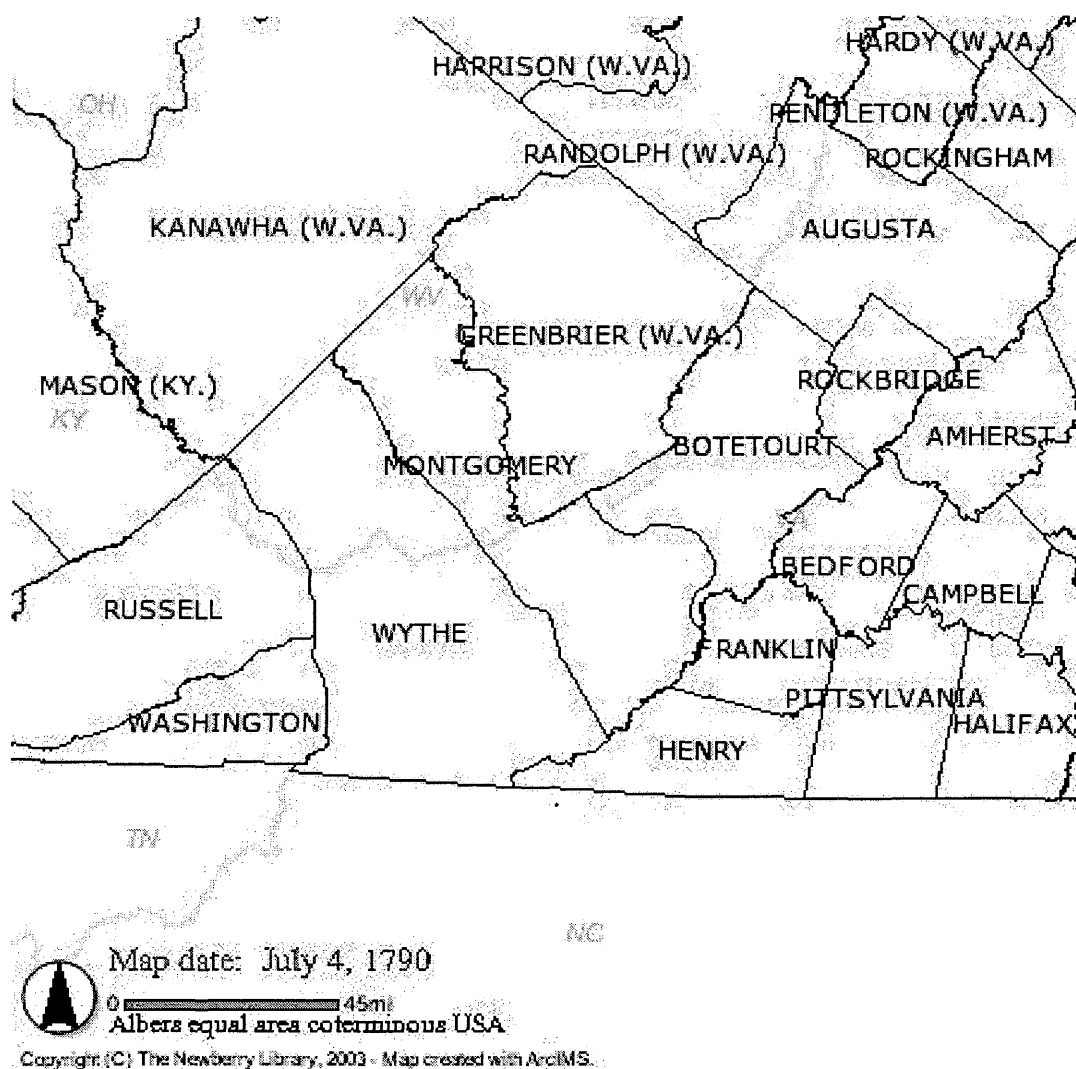
APPENDIX 1

Children of William Preston (1729-1783) and Susanna Smith Preston (1740-1823)¹⁷⁵

- Elizabeth Preston Madison (1762-1837)
 - William Strother Madison (d. 1782)
- John Preston (1764-1827)
 - Mary Radford (d. 1810)
 - Eliza Ann Carrington (1768-1839)
- Francis Preston (1765-1835)
 - Sarah Buchanan Campbell (1778-1846)
- Sarah Preston McDowell (1767-1841)
 - James McDowell (1770-1835)
- Ann Preston (1769-1782)
- William Preston Jr. (1770-1821)
 - Caroline Hancock (1785-1847)
- Susanna Preston Hart (1772-1833)
 - Nathaniel Hart (1770-1844)
- James Patton Preston (1774-1843)
 - Ann Barraud Taylor (1778-1861)
- Mary Preston Lewis (1776-1824)
 - John Lewis (1758-1823)
- Letitia Preston Floyd (1779-1852)
 - John Floyd Jr. (1783-1837)
- Thomas Lewis Preston (1781-1812)
 - Edmonia Madison Randolph (1787-1847)
- Margaret Brown Preston Preston (1784-1843)
 - John Preston (1781-1864)

¹⁷⁵ Genealogical information extracted from Dorman, *The Prestons of Smithfield and Greenfield in Virginia: Descendants of John and Elizabeth (Patton) Preston through Five Generations*, 12-13, 47-74.

APPENDIX 2

Map of the Southwestern Virginia Counties, 1790¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ Newberry Library, "Virginia Historical Counties - Interactive Map," *Atlas of Historical Boundaries Project*, accessed June 25, 2015. <http://historical-county.newberry.org/website/Virginia/viewer.htm>.

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