

Proposed Project: Female Apprentices in Nineteenth-Century North Carolina

Background: Relatively new to the study of history, women of the American Early Republic have only been researched for around forty years.¹ Lower-class women have been studied little in this period as they left few extant primary sources. What does exist, however, are apprenticeship bonds. These bonds were contracts for apprenticeships and provide basic information on the individuals entering into the apprenticeship and their masters. The few studies of apprenticeships in the United States—Boston, New Orleans, and Frederick County, Virginia—reveal that each region differs in the function of the apprenticeships, resulting in the need to study other regions to understand more fully the nature of apprenticeships.² North Carolina’s extensive and readily available collection of these bonds and court records makes the state an attractive focus of study.³

Purpose: This project will survey and examine female apprenticeships and masters in one North Carolina county from 1820 to 1860.

Timeline: Beginning in fall 2017, I will begin a thorough literature review. Commencing mid-semester, the apprentice bonds from a selected county in North Carolina will be reviewed and information from those girls will be used to create a database. This database will then be used to study the demographics of girls entering apprenticeships in that county. The U.S. Census and the court records from the Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions as well as the Superior Court will then be read to understand further the circumstances of female apprentices and their masters. Commencing in the spring semester of 2018, the information collected will be written up as a paper. This project will be presented as a conference paper at the History honor society’s, Phi Alpha Theta, regional conference in the spring of 2018.

Research Methods: Using primary sources from the State Archives of North Carolina and the National Archives, I will analyze the apprentice bonds from a county between 1820 and 1860 in North Carolina. The bonds will be the focal point of the research and a database will be formed from them noting the apprentice’s age, race, trade, master, and duration of their apprenticeship. In addition, the U.S. Censuses from 1850 and 1860 combined with the court records from that North Carolina county will be used to learn more about the girls and their masters.

Resources: To conduct this research, four types of primary sources will be used. The principle source will be the apprenticeship bonds available from the State Archives of North Carolina. The supplemental court records from the Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions and Superior Court are also available from the State Archives of North Carolina. The bonds and all court records are available for order in microfilm from the state archive. The final sources are the 1850 and 1860 U.S. Censuses.⁴

¹ Carol Lasser, “Politics in and of Women’s History in the Early American Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 36 (Summer 2016): 313-317.

² Ruth Wallis Herndon and John E. Murray, eds., *Children Bound to Labor: The Pauper Apprentice System in Early America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 17-18.

³ Other sources on the subject include: Richard Rohrs, “Training in an “art, trade, mystery, and employment”: Opportunity or Exploitation of Free Black Apprentices in New Hanover County, North Carolina, 1820—1859,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 90 (April 2013): 127-148; Karin L. Zipf, *Labor of Innocents: Forced Apprenticeship in North Carolina, 1715–1919* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

⁴ U.S. census records are available for order from the United States National Archives.