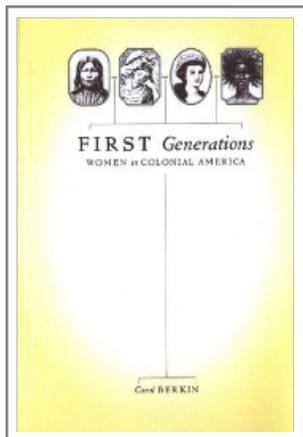


# BOOK REVIEW

Contributed by Mary Ferm

## *First Generations: Women in Colonial America* by Carol Berkin; New York, Hill and Wang (1996)



What do we do about the women in our genealogy research, often people who left few records? This book by Carol Berkin helps fill in the gaps in our knowledge. In eight chapters she writes about historical women who lived under different circumstances and then describes the lives they likely lived. Organized by chronologically, "First Generations" describes the lives of various women who differed along the lines of race, region and social class.

Mary Cole, born in Maryland in 1653, lived in a world where mortality fractured every family relationship, and men and women unconnected by blood served as surrogates to family.

Chesapeake women spent less of their lives in household production such as spinning and butter churning than did women in England, and

part of their lives toiling beside men in tobacco fields.

One of the book's New England examples is Hannah Duston (sister of BIGS member Claire Smith's ancestor) who was captured by Native Americans and then escaped after murdering them. Not all captives took this extreme measure, or even returned to their families. Despite the Puritan's sure sense of superiority of their culture, some, especially women, found the Abnaki world more desirable. The Puritan church could be both a conservative and an expansive force for women. The next chapters are on Native American women up and down the East coast, women in the middle colonies (Dutch in New York, Quakers in New Jersey and Pennsylvania), and African- American women throughout the colonies.

The last three chapters consider changes in womens' circumstances over time: "The Rise of Gentility" tells about a woman who became a planter and businesswoman in the mid-1700s South Carolina. Her story contrasts with the lives of working women in New England and Pennsylvania. "Beat of the Drum" discusses how ordinary life and expectations were swept away by the Revolution and a protracted home front war. "Fair Daughters of Columbia" studies the lives of white women in the new republic.

There are no footnotes for specific assertions, however an extensive bibliographical essay describes the state of scholarship and the sources used for each chapter, and suggests further readings. I found all chapters interesting even if I did not have direct ancestors in those situations. The different circumstances of the women profiled revealed what the lives of my ancestors likely were out of a range of possibilities. This was a highly readable and illuminating read.