

20. Women in the Household Economy (1709)

Source: *John Lawson, A New Voyage to Carolina (London, 1709), pp. 84–85.*

In the household economy of eighteenth-century America, the family was the center of economic life. Most work revolved around the home, and all members—men, women, and children—contributed to the family's livelihood. John Lawson, an English naturalist, came to Carolina in 1700 and traveled over a thousand miles, studying the natural environment and trading with Indians. His *A New Voyage to Carolina* offered a very favorable description of life in the colony. Lawson's account vividly described the lives of free Carolina women and the numerous kinds of labor they performed. The work of farmers' wives and daughters often spelled the difference between a family's self-sufficiency and poverty. Lawson was captured and killed during an Indian uprising in 1711.

THE WOMEN ARE the most industrious sex in that place, and, by their good houswifery, make a great deal of cloth of their own cotton, wool and flax; some of them keeping their families (though large) very decently appareled, both with linens and woolens, so that they have no occasion to run into the merchant's debt, or lay their money out on stores for clothing. . . .

They marry very young; some at thirteen or fourteen; and she that stays till twenty, is reckoned a stale maid; which is a very indifferent character in that warm country. The women are very fruitful; most houses being full of little ones. It has been observed, that women long married, and without children, in other places, have removed to Carolina, and become joyful mothers. They have very easy travail in their child-bearing, in which they are so happy, as seldom to miscarry. . . .

Many of the women are very handy in canoes, and will manage them with great dexterity and skill, which they become accustomed to in this watery country. They are ready to help their husbands

in any servile work, as planting, when the season of the weather requires expedition; pride seldom banishing good houswifery. The girls are not bred up to the [spinning] wheel and sewing only; but the dairy and affairs of the house they are very well acquainted withal; so that you shall see them, whilst very young, manage their business with a great deal of conduct and alacrity. The children of both sexes are very docile, and learn any thing with a great deal of Ease and Method; and those that have the advantages of education, write good hands, and prove good accountants, which is most coveted, and indeed most necessary in these parts.

Questions

1. What are the most important kinds of work done by Carolina women, according to Lawson?
2. How strict do gender roles appear to have been in early Carolina?