

Chapter Five

Spheres of Influence: Working White and Black Women in Antebellum Savannah

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The vast majority of southern women worked. About three-quarters of all white southern families did not own slaves on the eve of the Civil War, and consequently women in these families generally shared with black women the necessity of working.¹ Whatever else may have divided them, and there was much, black and white women regularly toiled in the fields to produce goods for the market and for the dinner table. They worked in the home caring for children and occasionally producing handicrafts. And in urban areas, as this essay will demonstrate, they pursued a variety of wage-earning occupations. As Stephanie McCurry has demonstrated, this was true in some slaveholding families as well. In coastal South Carolina, it was the work of the wives and daughters that helped to secure the economic independence of yeoman households, even those owning as many as ten slaves. Only a small number of elite white women in the South enjoyed the leisured lifestyle popularized in twentieth-century mythology.²

Any study of the lives of antebellum women faces problems because most sources are written by men, about men, and for men. Official statistical compilations, for example, frequently overlooked the part that women played in southern life. But our ignorance of women's lives and experiences in the antebellum South is gradually being reversed. Since the 1970s the historiographic anonymity of southern women has been overcome to some extent by scholars such as Suzanne Lebsack, Elizabeth Varon, and Catherine Clinton, among others, but the focus has tended to be on elite women rather than ordinary women.³

Moreover, scholars have examined the domestic lives of women in far more detail than their public lives, and, with a few exceptions, rural women in preference to urban women. The domesticity that was the norm for rural elite women has been termed the woman's "sphere." But, as this essay will demonstrate, women's "spheres" were not only domestic. In fact, a woman's work, paid or unpaid, has perhaps an equal claim to be termed a "sphere" because it dominated the normal day-to-day existence for so many women.⁴ By broadening our interpretation of the "woman's sphere" we can explore in greater depth the interaction of race, class, and gender in the antebellum South.

This essay is a case study of the lives of working women in Savannah, a city that dominated the Georgia low country, acting as a focal point for the coastal rice and cotton trades. In addition, as an entrepôt, it was the only place where low-country residents could hope to have a modicum of purchasing choice. The population of the city was large, rising from five thousand in 1800 to more than twenty-two thousand in 1860, and cosmopolitan, with slaves and free blacks making up between a third and a half of the urban population. Among whites, more than half did not own slaves and a large number were immigrants.⁵ Determining the size of the female workforce in Savannah is not straightforward. The best source is the 1860 federal census, which listed 1,578 white women and 228 free black women with occupations in Chatham County, the vast majority of whom would have been resident in Savannah. No comparable occupational data was collected for bondwomen in 1860, but the city tax records show that there were 7,712 slaves in Savannah in 1860, allowing us to estimate the female slave population at 3,856. Since previous city censuses show that bondwomen constituted about 60 percent of the urban slave population, the female slave population of Savannah in 1860 was probably more like 4,600. Of these women, we also know that just over half of them were aged over fifteen, thus the adult female slave population in Savannah in 1860 was perhaps about 2,300.⁶ Nearly all of these slave women would have worked.⁷

Perversely, the best documented of all Savannah's female groups is also the smallest, namely free black women. In 1817 the city registered as many free black men and women as it could find (and judging from the much larger number counted by the census, city officials did not try particularly hard), repeating the task periodically during the remainder of the antebellum period.⁸ This register usually included occupational data, and therefore free black women constitute the only female population in the city whose occupations can be traced and analyzed over a period of time.

In 1817 only nineteen free black women were given an occupation in the

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register: nine sold "small wares," another seven were cooks, two were laborers, and one was a washer. Seven years later, in 1824, free black women were starting to congregate in certain occupations, with women occupied as "seamstresses," "washerwomen," and "vendors of small wares" collectively accounting for 60 percent of the workforce. Yet small numbers of free black women continued to find work in more unusual situations, as shopkeepers and gardeners.⁹ However, by 1829, two-thirds of Savannah's free black women were working as seamstresses or washerwomen, and the proportion of women involved in retailing had halved from 20 percent to 10 percent of the workforce.¹⁰ The trend among free black women therefore seems to be one of greater occupational specialization, with fewer and fewer women employed outside their own homes. It seems likely that free black women were making informed choices about exactly which occupations suited their individual and collective circumstances. Certainly free black women could be responsive to the needs of the labor market. Over a number of years, several women moved from washing to cooking, or from selling to sewing, no doubt making careful decisions about which pursuits brought the most regular income. Nancy Goudling, for example, retailed goods in 1829 but was a pastry cook in 1860. Other free black women settled on jobs early and stuck with them. Mary Sheftall, born in Savannah in 1799, was first registered as a washerwoman in 1824 and was still doing laundry work in 1860. Most of these women earned sufficient incomes to maintain their families, but women such as Priscilla Moody, who earned enough as a vendor of small wares to eventually purchase her own shop, were few and far between.¹¹

Significant differences existed between white and free black working women in Savannah. For example, of more than 3,500 white women in Savannah in 1860 between the ages of twenty and fifty-nine, roughly 1,300 of them, or just over a third, were assigned occupations in the federal census. In stark contrast, more than four-fifths of free black women of a similar age worked.¹² The racial differences are even more marked among women over sixty and those under twenty. Only about one in six white women in these age groups was working, compared with more than one-half of free black teenage women and three-quarters of free black women over sixty.¹³ From this evidence it is clear that the length of the working lives of free black women significantly exceeded those of white women. Nancy Johnson was apparently still working as a nurse in Savannah at the age of 103. Women lacking occupations were not necessarily idle. Married women with young children, for instance, may well have spent all their time in child care and housework.¹⁴ Given that fewer than half of Savannah's households owned slaves, and that a number owned just one slave, it is perhaps

fair to estimate that only about a quarter of white women in the city were ladies of leisure.¹⁵

The reasons that so many of Savannah's women worked no doubt varied greatly, but the available evidence suggests that most women, of all social groups, worked simply to survive.¹⁶ Two-thirds of working white women and nearly 90 percent of free black women in 1860 were either the principal or sole breadwinners in their households.¹⁷ More than half had dependents, so not working, in a society where social welfare was nonexistent and charity provided only the most basic level of support, was simply not a viable option.¹⁸ Women were particularly vital to the sustenance of free black families in Savannah. Chatham County's free black community had a female majority, and consequently there was a particular onus on free black women to earn sufficient income to support their families.¹⁹ Moreover, whereas a third of working white women had husbands living with them, only about 10 percent of free black women were in the same situation. It is entirely conceivable that many husbands and fathers of free black women and children were slaves; indeed, the relatively high proportion of free black women who had children but no husbands suggests this was the case. Such husbands would have been unable to contribute with any degree of regularity toward their families' incomes.²⁰ Therefore, many free black women in Savannah would have worked principally to avoid starvation and destitution for themselves and those who depended on them. Some of these women built themselves a reputation for skill and competency by word of mouth—Asphasia Mirault's bakery and ice-cream store, for instance, gained a legendary status among Savannah's youth—but for many there was little security beyond the casual business they themselves could drum up, perhaps by going door to door.²¹

Black and white women in Savannah had work in common because they experienced similar economic pressures regardless of race. But the purpose of this essay is not only to establish that a large number of women worked in antebellum Savannah; it also seeks to show what actually determined a woman's occupation. The southern racial hierarchy seemingly dictated that black people should undertake only the most menial occupations, yet the evidence from this southern city suggests that race was only one occupational determinant. Women grouped themselves in certain occupations because they shared common family backgrounds, ages, and ethnicities as well. The spheres of occupational influence in antebellum Savannah were actually determined by a number of complex variables that interacted and intersected with each other.

Race was obviously one factor that could influence the employment of

women in Savannah. Some occupations were generally not open to black women whether they were enslaved or free. For example, in 1860 there were thirty-one white women employed as teachers, a job that black women were legally excluded from. Among white women, there were also 122 boardinghouse keepers, twenty-five shopkeepers, three hoteliers, a brass and iron foundress, a doctress, and an actress. These jobs were generally white occupational spheres because the vast majority of black women in the city would not have had access to the capital necessary to set themselves up as independent businesswomen, necessarily entailing the purchase of stock and the purchase or rent of premises. Furthermore, most free black women would have known this and few would have wasted time, effort, and perhaps money in trying to get a foothold in such occupations. Of course, for every such generalization there is an exception. Rachel, the slave of Patrick Ryan, applied to the Southern Claims Commission after the Civil War for \$1,659 in recompense for loss of property during the Union occupation of Savannah. She claimed that "I always hired my own time from the time I was a woman grown" and when her daughters were old enough she hired their time as well. With the profits of their labor, Rachel first rented and subsequently purchased a large sixteen-room house and took in boarders. Evidently, this woman believed that one needed to be neither white nor free to pursue such an occupation, and local white residents who knew about this arrangement apparently agreed, even writing in support of her claim.²²

Despite Rachel's case, there were clearly significant hurdles to overcome if a black woman was to be so visibly financially independent. Far more common was for black women to engage in economic activity that was not so high profile, but significant nevertheless. Black women came to dominate market trading despite the distrust of the city authorities. As several scholars have shown, the informal slave economy was probably at its most vibrant in the Georgia and South Carolina low country, with slaves taking advantage of the task-labor regime of rice plantations to engage in their own pursuits on their own time.²³ Probably the most common occupation for those slaves motivated to work in their free time was in the gardens provided for them on most plantations. Bondwomen in particular were expected to tend to the garden, growing a wide variety of vegetables and rearing livestock, especially chickens.²⁴ As production increased, and surpluses were produced, a visit to the weekly market in Savannah became necessary.

The Savannah city market was held daily in Ellis Square, and as early as 1775 slaves had adopted Sunday as the day they brought produce to market to trade.²⁵ The best description of the market in Savannah comes from a New Englander

resident in Georgia for eight years. Emily Burke came to teach at the Savannah Female Asylum in 1840 and on her very first morning in Savannah was awakened before dawn by the noise from the market, which her hotel overlooked. Her vivid description of the market is worth quoting at length.

In the morning . . . I saw a great many colored persons . . . assembled together under a sort of shelter. That, from the appearance of things, I soon judged to be the city market. . . . This building is furnished with stalls, owned by individuals in the city who send produce there to sell.

In each of these stalls stands a servant woman to sell her master's property, who is careful to deck out his saleswoman in the most gaudy colors to make her as conspicuous as possible that she may be successful in trade. I once heard a gentleman, whose saleswoman had not been successful say, "he must get her a new handkerchief for her head and see if she would not sell more! . . ."

The market is free for trade from five o'clock in the morning till ten. Then the bell rings and all are obliged to disperse and take with them their unsold articles, for everything that remains on the ground after ten o'clock belongs to the keeper. Trade is not allowed in the market excepting on Saturday evening, when it is more crowded than at any other time. For the people come then to purchase for the Sabbath, and many go just because they want to see a great crowd. It has been estimated that on some pleasant evenings there are no less than four thousand people in the market at one time. Here almost every eatable thing can be found. Vegetables fresh from the garden are sold the year round. All kinds of fish, both shell and finny, may be had here; birds of all kinds, both tame and wild; and the most delicious tropical fruits, as well as those which are brought from cold countries. People travel a great distance for the purpose of buying and selling in the market. I have known women to come one hundred miles to sell the produce of their own industry.²⁶

As a newcomer to Savannah, Emily Burke could not have realized that most of the goods retailed in the market were in fact produced by slaves in their own gardens. As to the agency of owners in decking out their bondwomen, Burke later contradicted herself by noting that slave women themselves took every opportunity to dress up in bright colors.²⁷ This description of the city market shows it to be the vibrant hub of the city's commercial and retail life.

Most, if not all, of the public market trading in the Savannah City Market was

undertaken by women—just as it was in Charleston and throughout the Caribbean Islands and in West Africa.²⁸ In the nineteenth century the market was a female sphere, but this had not always been the case. In 1792 a male slave was fined by the city council for selling vegetables without a badge, and four years later bondman Cato was ordered to be whipped for forestalling in the market.²⁹ However, after 1800 there is no evidence that bondmen were retailing regularly, though some free black men continued to work as butchers in the market.³⁰ Several observers commented on the black women who traded in low-country markets, one traveler being particularly impressed by their “great quickness in reckoning and making change [with] rarely an error in the result.”³¹ The dominance of bondwomen in the city market is also shown by the number of licensed slave vendors. In 1801, the Savannah City Council granted thirty vending badges to slaves, twenty-five of which went to bondwomen.³²

The sheer number of slave women bringing their garden produce to Savannah meant that they began to dominate the market. White and free black traders were effectively excluded from the market most likely because they did not have the same regular supply line direct from the plantation.³³ Even if white and free black women were able to procure supplies, slave women were able to undercut their competitors because their prices reflected the fact that their owners continued to be the main providers of the necessities of life. It was not long before the market had become a sphere for black women, a development that the Chatham County grand jury believed would be “highly injurious to the citizens.”³⁴

The jury’s prediction was correct, because once slave women had secured their monopoly position in the market, they began to increase their prices to white shoppers. This was effectively racial discrimination: prices offered to fellow slaves or to free blacks apparently did not increase at the same rate as those offered to whites, and to ensure that civic authorities were powerless to prevent it, slaves apparently sold much of the best farm produce before the Sunday market officially opened. In 1814 the Chatham County grand jury cited “numerous Negro sellers” for “forestalling in purchasing large quantities of eggs, poultry, etc. and vending them at a higher rate to the inhabitants.”³⁵ Four years later the grand jury cited “as an evil of great magnitude, the ordinance granting badges to colored and black women, for the purpose of hawking about articles for sale. These women monopolize in divers ways, many of the necessities of life, which are brought to our market, by which the price is greatly enhanced, and the poor inhabitants of our city, proportionately distressed.”³⁶ Evidently a new ordinance passed in 1817 that limited the hours that trading could occur in

the market was neither observed by slave vendors nor rigorously enforced by city officials.³⁷ Much of the trading between bondwomen relied on personal contacts, often to the exclusion of white people, rich and poor alike. Apparently a ploy used by slave women working as domestics in Savannah was to pretend that purchases were for their white families, when in reality they were buying for their own consumption.³⁸ This is not to say that white people did not purchase at the market. When trying to regulate Sunday trading in 1829, the city council itself acknowledged that it was customary for “the poorer class of white persons who generally receive their wages in the evening of Saturday . . . [to] . . . require a short time on Sunday morning to preserve the usual food for their families.”³⁹ Indeed, we can probably go further and say that most of the white people who made purchases in the market would have been women. These women were most likely to have been nonslaveholders who did not have slave domestics to purchase for them. Unfortunately, no direct testimony survives from these women describing how they felt negotiating with black women for groceries and most likely being forced to pay over the odds. Moreover, it is also likely that black and white women who regularly visited the city market became familiar in a way that was not common in the South.

The disquiet felt in some quarters of Savannah society about the activities of market women resulted in crowds of white people gathering to use “the most offensive and undecorous language [to] insult and abuse females and others who have articles to sell.” Such was the threat to the peace of the city that the grand jury requested that the city watch be posted at the market during the early hours of the morning to arrest “all persons so offending.”⁴⁰ On another occasion the mayor specifically ordered the arrest of “all colored females, who may be selling in and outside the market, with or without badges when not authorized by the ordinance regulating badges.”⁴¹ Female vendors selling their goods on the streets of the city were also criticized. The grand jury complained that while white people were engaged in Sunday worship, “the multitude are crying small wares about our streets,” and it likened the number of slave vendors in Savannah to an infestation.⁴² The Sabbath Union, formed by evangelicals to end Sunday trading in the city, also complained that those “sequestered in the temple of the most high” were compelled “to listen to the rude cry of the blacks offering their articles for sale, under the very windows of the churches.”⁴³ Clearly the slave vendors caused much disquiet in the city; one grand jury went so far as to claim that “they encourage theft; deprave our domestics, and by their evil influence and dissolute lives endanger the safety of the city.”⁴⁴

During the 1840s and 1850s the monopoly position of slave vendors was chal-

lenged by some white women. Several observers reported that white women from the countryside surrounding Savannah brought their own farm produce to the city.⁴⁵ Rural white women, while they could sell their produce in a local country store, perhaps preferred the Savannah city market because it gave them the chance to purchase a wider variety of items, at good prices, than they normally had access to. Emily Burke noted that groups of up to six women would travel together upward of a hundred miles in order to retail in Savannah: "When they arrive, they go directly to the market place, tie their mules round about upon the outside of the market square, kindle up little fires in the street near the market and cook their suppers . . . instead of sleeping in their carts, they camp down upon the cold, damp bricks in the market with no other bed than what one coarse blanket makes for them."⁴⁶

Frederick Law Olmsted similarly observed in 1854 that the women's preferred modes of transport were "small one horse carts."⁴⁷ In addition to these periodic visitations from rural white women, some urban white women were prepared to retail goods on the streets and in the market. Five white women in 1860 were listed as retailing such goods as milk, candy, and poultry. But although their activity may have broken the black monopoly on trading, the effect of just five white women would have been minimal. One white woman, conscious of the dominance of black women in the market, decided that the only way she could retail successfully was to "black her face." Eighteen-year-old Euphemia Hover earned herself a \$3 fine for her trouble.⁴⁸ Undoubtedly, black women continued to dominate the city market until the Civil War—they had made it their sphere and preserved it as such.

If black women wished to obtain goods that were not for sale in the market they had to visit one of the city's shops, twenty-five of which in 1860 were owned by white women. We know that white female shopkeepers in Savannah were perfectly prepared to retail to slaves, even in violation of municipal laws. Women such as Sophia Austin, Mary Garnet, Sarah Falligrant, and Catherine Prendergast regularly appeared before council in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s on charges of retailing liquor without a license, violating the Sabbath ordinances, or "entertaining Negroes."⁴⁹ Indeed, white female shopkeepers located their establishments in the western areas of the city most densely populated with African Americans.⁵⁰ Sarah Falligrant even petitioned the city council for a permit to retail goods in the market square, where bondwomen were generally congregated.⁵¹ Bondwomen wishing to purchase at these shops may well have been forced to pay higher prices for cloth, groceries, tobacco, or liquor than

white customers, reversing the pattern of trading seen in the market. Shop-keeping was, by 1860, an exclusively white pursuit.

Either through legal discrimination or through ingenuity and enterprise some areas of employment therefore became almost racially exclusive. White women would have found it as hard to become market traders in Savannah as black women would have trying to become teachers. Considering that race was one of the key social determinants in antebellum Savannah, this is not entirely surprising. Still, many other jobs women held in the city were not determined by race but by other factors such as age, nativity, and family status.

The youngest working women in Savannah generally occupied the most menial positions. Among white women, the vast majority of them were not native southerners; indeed, more than half of all working white women in Savannah in 1860 had been born in Ireland, easily outnumbering the combined totals of those born within the state of Georgia and those from the rest of the United States.⁵² The Irish women working in Savannah in 1860 were generally under thirty, and they dominated the least skilled areas of employment. They constituted, for example, nearly 70 percent of white washers and ironers, nearly 80 percent of white domestics and servants, and more than 80 percent of white chambermaids. In part these figures reflected the age, and presumably the skill level, of these women. Irish servant women were, on average, just twenty-four, and the youngest of them, Mary Manning, was just eleven. Many of these women would have lacked the skills to earn a living in any other way. Young white girls had long been employed in such capacities. Between 1811 and 1830 the Savannah Female Asylum bound out sixty girls to domestic work in the city, all of whom were under eighteen.⁵³ By 1860 most of the city's hotels and boardinghouses employed Irish girls in preference to free black women or bondwomen, most likely because they were cheaper. Slaves who might have worked on hire in such establishments had to pay their owners a weekly fee earned from their income and could not afford to take jobs that offered board and lodging instead of wages.⁵⁴ Moreover, hired slaves were not totally dependent on their employers; they always had recourse to their owners if they were dissatisfied with their positions. Young Irish women most likely had nowhere else to go, and employers may well have reasoned that they had more of an economic hold over their white employees than their black ones. White women may have constituted 95 percent of the city's free-labor servants, according to the 1860 *Census*, but they shared certain characteristics with their free black counterparts.⁵⁵ Nearly all young servant girls, regardless of race, were young and

single and lacked family ties (according to the 1860 *Census* only one Irish servant girl was married and only five had children) and this made them particularly attractive to employers. These women had no other demands on their time (for example a husband or children), and they would accept employment in return for board and lodging rather than the cash wages that women who were breadwinners required. On occasion white servant women even worked alongside black women. Three Irish girls worked with Ann LaRoach, a thirty-year-old free black woman, as servants in Maria Dickson's boardinghouse, for example.⁵⁶

Women who worked as domestics in private homes were significantly older than those who worked as servants in boardinghouses (on average, twenty-nine years old as opposed to twenty-four for white women, thirty-five as opposed to twenty for free black women), and their family situations were completely different. Eight out of ten white domestics were married, and more than two-thirds had children. The trend was not so marked for free black women, but they were still three times more likely than servant women to be married with children. These women most often worked as resident domestics, living together with their own children in their employers' households. The type of work white female domestics were employed to do evidently included child care in addition to cooking and cleaning, all pursuits that could be completed while they cared for their own families. The flexibility offered by domestic work was probably what made it particularly attractive to working mothers.

The demand for white domestics, in a traditionally black occupation, varied over time. Many antebellum low-country planters who owned homes in Savannah had no need for white domestics since they would have brought a number of their female slaves to town to act as cooks, maids, nurses, and washerwomen. The large number of carriage houses still standing behind the big houses in Savannah is testimony to that. House-servants often worked long hours, and owners no doubt found it more economical to use either older female slaves who were no longer productive in the fields or young girls rather than to pay white women. Other city residents hired black domestics, particularly in the early part of the nineteenth century, when the number of young immigrant women was small. William Curry, for example, negotiated with "black Betty" to cook for him in return for a weekly wage.⁵⁷

By 1820 the bondwomen's stranglehold on domestic work had begun to weaken under pressure from the rapid immigration of Irish women.⁵⁸ Employers started to advertise for domestics, claiming that they were "not particular to age or color," requiring only that applicants be "of good disposition, and accustomed to children."⁵⁹ Other employers did not specify race in their adver-

tisements for servants.⁶⁰ Indeed, the early 1820s saw an increase in the number of advertisements from families in Savannah seeking white women as domestics, and from young white women themselves seeking employment.⁶¹ The fact that employers were increasingly interested in white domestic servants is perhaps a confirmation of Stephanie Cole's argument, presented elsewhere in this volume, that parents were becoming worried about the formative influence that domestic servants, especially nurses, were having on their children. Unlike Upper South residents, however, residents in Savannah remained open to employing black women to care for their children. In 1860 one advertisement sought "a competent nurse for a child, to remain in the city, white or colored."⁶² The principal concern for this employer was competency, not skin color.

City residents who did not have a large number of idle slaves, or merchants permanently resident in the city who did not own a plantation, were prepared to employ white girls ahead of their slave counterparts. To these people, or to the aspiring middle classes, the wages paid to a white Irish girl were far less than the expense of purchasing a slave, and her labor was fundamentally more flexible. She could be hired at short notice and dismissed easily if her work was not up to scratch or her services were no longer required.

The only occupation that employed white and free black women in roughly equal numbers was laundry work.⁶³ These women shared more than their occupations, being collectively the oldest working women in the city.⁶⁴ Moreover, white and free black washerwomen had to compete with some bondwomen who hired themselves out to do laundry. One visitor to Savannah in 1848 commented that slave women "hire themselves of their masters, and pay them so much a month. They do washing, at fifty cents a dozen, and go for the clothes and return them."⁶⁵ All women undertaking this work would have had to compete on price, speed, and competency in order to gain a regular clientele.

By far the most popular occupations among free women in 1860 were in the clothing trade: dressmaker, seamstress, milliner, and mantua maker.⁶⁶ More than 40 percent of working white women in Savannah, and over half of the 228 free black women with jobs in 1860, worked in the clothing trade.⁶⁷ Although there was a wide range of occupational specialties within the clothing industry, such as vestmaker, shirtmaker, and mantua maker, the vast majority of women in this line of work described themselves either as dressmakers or as seamstresses, with the latter outnumbering the former by a ratio of two to one among white women and ten to one among free black women.⁶⁸ It is therefore evident that white and free black, and most likely a small number of slave, women must have competed for this work.⁶⁹ However, any such competition would have been

rather unequal. While clothing work was equally important to free black and white women in terms of the proportion employed, the sheer number of white women in the labor pool ensured that they would dominate this sphere. Indeed the 1860 *Census* shows that there were six times as many white women working in the clothing business as free black women.

What made the clothing trade attractive was that the volume and regularity of the work, and therefore the income, was fairly constant—people always needed their clothes repaired. Moreover, it didn't require a significant investment in raw materials, and since many women worked from home, they did not have to rent a separate workspace. This last point was particularly important. Seamstressing could be readily combined with child care, and this almost certainly influenced the type of women who worked in the clothing trade. Most seamstresses in 1860 were in their early thirties, and two-fifths had children, a higher proportion than in any other profession. Black and white seamstresses also shared similar backgrounds. More than half of all Savannah's seamstresses were born in Georgia or South Carolina, whereas foreign-born women constituted less than a third of dressmakers and seamstresses. Locally born women had certain advantages over immigrant women. They had long experienced the economic conditions of the city, they knew the best suppliers and the best retail locations, and most important they had had the time to build up a wide clientele. It is perhaps for these reasons that native-born women were more likely to be in better paid, more skilled occupations than immigrant women.

It is also possible that seamstressing work in Savannah was divided along racial lines. White people may well have preferred to visit white seamstresses, while black people patronized black seamstresses. Moreover, it is possible that female slaves were allowed to choose a seamstress to repair the clothing of a white family. Apparently the "most opulent inhabitants of Charleston, when they have any work to be done, do not send it themselves, but leave it to their domestics to employ what workmen they please; it universally happens that those domestics prefer men of their own color and condition; and as to a greatness of business thus continually passing through their hands, the black mechanics enjoy as complete a monopoly, as if it were secured to them by law."⁷⁰ It is possible that similar networks operated among black women in Savannah.

It is unlikely that white seamstresses could rely on their race alone to secure them sufficient employment in this competitive market. Their skill and competency had to be sufficiently eminent to attract and retain customers. That some white women never achieved this degree of proficiency is shown by the formation of the Needle Woman's Friend Society in 1849. The stated aim of the

society was "to give employment to poor women" by soliciting needlework from city residents and by retailing the finished products in a city store. One Savannah newspaper praised the "unquestionably legitimate" aims of the society "to prevent the masses of our race from a perpetual endurance of the miseries of want."⁷¹ The first annual report of the society in 1850 was fairly positive about what the members had achieved. About 70 women were being helped by the society, which had attracted more than 300 paying subscribers to fund its workfare program. Of particular note was that the Central Railroad had placed an order with the society for "Negro clothing," which kept several white women in employment. However, the directresses had been forced to relocate from the society's central store on Bay Street to one "far from convenient," due to the high rents. In subsequent years the reports would not be so positive. In 1851 the directresses acknowledged that they struggled to win the support of residents, generally because the work completed by the women was so shoddy. The work was of poor quality in part because "the class who are most in need of our aid are women generally unable to do other than coarse and plain work, [and] often careless in executing even that." Consequently, during the 1850s the number of subscribers more than halved and the society struggled to stay afloat despite emotive pleas in the city press regarding the "industrious needlewomen who daily call [for work]."⁷² It seems that competency rather than race was the overriding determinant of success for seamstresses. Although there was most likely a difference in quality and price of goods between white seamstresses who owned a shop and those, both black and white, who worked from home, any seamstress who earned herself a reputation for good quality work would have made a reasonable living.

Several other occupations employed women in small numbers. About 200 women, mainly young Irish girls and native-born free black women, earned their living from prostitution.⁷³ Older women, which in antebellum Savannah meant women in their early forties, tended to work as nurses, or as midwives. Like seamstressing, laundry work, and domestic servitude, these were employments that suited the skill or family circumstances of Savannah's white and black working women. In all cases, it appears that race was not particularly relevant.

The principal spheres in which working women found themselves in Savannah were in part defined by race. If we consider skilled businesswomen as constituting the upper end of the occupational scale and unskilled workers the lower end, then white women were, overall, more likely to be found in the top end and black women at the bottom end. Moreover, exclusivity worked both ways: some occupations remained solely white, but that was balanced by white

women's exclusion from the city market by slave women. However, the picture is far more complex than this simple racial typology makes out. Other factors cut across racial lines; older women had better jobs than younger women; native-born women worked in better-paid professions than immigrant women; married women were more skilled than single women. Age, status, experience, and nativity just as much as race therefore determined to which occupational sphere working women in Savannah would belong.

NOTES

1. John B. Boles, *Black Southerners, 1619-1869* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 75.
2. Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 59, 72-83.
3. Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984); Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).
4. On spheres see Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 151-74, and Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).
5. Claudia Goldin, *Urban Slavery in the American South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 52-53. For more on the demography of the low country see Lockley, *Lines in the Sand: Race and Class in Lowcountry Georgia, 1750-1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 1-28.
6. Betty Wood, *Women's Work, Men's Work: The Informal Slave Economies of Lowcountry Georgia, 1750-1830* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); City of Savannah, Tax Digest, 1860, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah (hereafter GHS). Residents paid \$3 for each slave aged between twelve and sixty. Younger or older slaves were taxed at the rate of \$1.50. The comparative statistics are taken from two city censuses of 1825 and 1835. In both years 62 percent of slaves were female, and in the later year, when age was noted, 57 percent of slaves were aged over fifteen (Savannah Board of Health Minutes, 21 September 1825 and August 1835, GHS). Tax records have been used in preference to census records because they differentiated between city slaves and county slaves.
7. A slave census from Charleston in 1848 reveals that the vast majority of bondwomen worked as domestic servants (87.6 percent) or as ordinary laborers (9.7 percent). Very small numbers worked as washerwomen (0.8 percent), seamstresses (0.5 percent), cooks (0.3 percent), or hucksters (0.4 percent) (Goldin, *Urban Slavery*, 43). These figures may be

skewed by women who worked in a skilled capacity but were reluctant to admit it to census enumerators because they lacked the required badge from the city council.

8. In 1830 the census counted 393 free blacks, 239 women, and 154 men resident in Chatham County, significantly more than the 246 registered by the city in 1828 (*Daily Georgian*, 10 March 1828). Census statistics are available at //fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census.
9. City of Savannah, Register of Free People of Color, 1817 and 1824, GHS.
10. This register was published by the *Daily Georgian*, 24 September 1829. Of 96 women with jobs, 60 were either washerwomen (27) or seamstresses (33); only 9 were retailers.
11. All of this information is taken from the Register of Free People of Color, 1817 and 1824; *Daily Georgian*, 24 September 1829; and *The 1860 Census of Chatham County, Georgia* (Easley, S.C.: Georgia Historical Society, 1980) (hereafter *1860 Census*). According to the 1860 Savannah Tax Digest, only nine free black women owned property.
12. The actual figures are 3,585 white women aged twenty to fifty-nine, 1,305 (36.4 percent) of whom were working. Of 187 free black women aged between twenty and fifty-nine, 154 (82.4 percent) were working. These and subsequent statistics are all taken from *1860 Census*.
13. Among white women under twenty, 16.1 percent worked; among women over sixty, 16.2 percent worked. Comparable figures for free black women are 49.3 percent and 74.4 percent, respectively.
14. Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *Ladies, Women, and Wenches: Choice and Constraint in Antebellum Charleston and Boston*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 41-45.
15. The proportion of nonslaveholders varied from 51 percent to 61 percent among Savannah taxpayers (Savannah Tax Digests, 1809-60, GHS).
16. See Timothy J. Lockley, "A Struggle for Survival: Non-Elite White Women in Low-country Georgia, 1790-1830," in *Women of the American South: A Multicultural Reader*, ed. Christie Ann Farnham (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 26-42.
17. Among working white women, 65.3 percent were unmarried; among free black women, 87.3 percent were.
18. 50.3 percent of white women and 53.5 percent of free black women were supporting other members of their families.
19. In 1860, 54 percent of Chatham County's free black population was female.
20. See Whittington B. Johnson, "Free African-American Women in Savannah, 1800-1860: Affluence and Autonomy amid Adversity," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 76 (1992): 262. Among free blacks, unmarried mothers outnumbered married mothers by a ratio of four to one.
21. William Harden, *Recollections of a Long and Satisfactory Life* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 48-49. Asphasia Mirault was recorded as a pastry cook in the 1829 Register of Free People of Color.
22. Case of Mrs. Rachel Brownfield, #13361, Southern Claims Commission, Settled Claim, RG 217, Chatham County, Georgia, GHS.
23. For a discussion of the task system see Philip D. Morgan, "Work and Culture: The

Task System and the World of Lowcountry Blacks, 1700–1880,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 39 (1982): 563–99. See also Philip D. Morgan, “The Ownership of Property by Slaves in the Mid-Nineteenth Century Lowcountry,” *Journal of Southern History* 49 (1983): 399–420.

24. Wood, *Women's Work*, 31–52.
25. Grand Jury Presentment, *Georgia Gazette*, 21 June 1775.
26. Emily Burke, *Pleasure and Pain: Reminiscences of Georgia in the 1840s* (Savannah: Beehive Press, 1991), 8–10.
27. *Ibid.*, 24.
28. Wood, *Women's Work*, 91–92 and 105–18. Robert Olwell argues that the Charleston marketplace was almost the exclusive preserve of slave women and that they defended it as “their space.” See Robert Olwell, “Loose, Idle and Disorderly: Slave Women in the Eighteenth-Century Charleston Marketplace,” in *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 97–110.
29. City Council Minutes, 21 March 1792 and 20 June 20 1796, GHS.
30. See the protest about black butchers in the *Savannah Republican*, 20 April 1820.
31. Eugene L. Schwaab, ed., *Travels in the Old South*, vol. 2 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1973), 326.
32. City Council Minutes, 26 January and 9 February 1801. About 100 badges were given to slave women between 1790 and 1810 (Wood, *Women's Work*, 87).
33. In 1829 nine free black women were registered as retailers, but by 1860 there were none (*Daily Georgian*, 24 September 1829, and 1860 *Census*).
34. *Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser*, 21 October 1796.
35. *Ibid.*, 13 January 1814.
36. *Daily Savannah Republican*, 17 January 1818. See also *Daily Georgian*, 26 April and 31 October 1826.
37. The new ordinance was passed on 20 October 1817 (City Council Minutes, 25 August 1817 and 2 July 1829).
38. *Daily Georgian*, 26 April 1826.
39. *Ibid.*, 2 July 1829.
40. *Ibid.*, 31 October 1826.
41. City Council Minutes, 24 July 1820.
42. Chatham County Superior Court Minutes, Book 7, 1804–8, April Term, 1808, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta; *Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser*, 13 January 1814.
43. Report of the Petition of the Sabbath Union, *Daily Georgian*, 2 August 1828.
44. *Savannah Republican*, 17 January 1818.
45. Frederick Law Olmsted, who observed women driving cartloads of produce to Savannah, commented that “the household markets of most of the Southern towns seem to be mainly supplied by the poor country people.” For his entertaining description of the rough manners of these women see his letter under the pseudonym “Yeoman” to the *New York Daily Times*, 14 June 1853.

46. Burke, *Pleasure and Pain*, 76–77.
47. Mills Lane, ed., *The Rambler in Georgia* (Savannah: Beehive Press, 1973), 211.
48. Savannah Records Court, Mayor's Fine Docket, 1856–57, 3 September 1857, GHS. By 1860 Euphemia Hover had decided it was safer to earn her living as a seamstress. See 1860 *Census*.
49. City Council Minutes, 1823–45. Sophia Austin was fined \$175 for eight trading offenses between 24 September 1829 and 2 July 1840. Mary Garnet was fined \$315 for fifteen citations between 13 November 1823 and 8 November 1827. Sarah Falligant was fined \$1 for “entertaining Negroes” on 7 December 1826. Catherine Prendergast was fined \$10 for two citations on 19 December 1839 and 20 February 1845.
50. Of five grocery shops owned by women in 1849, all were within three blocks of West Broad Street in heavily black areas (*City Directory for Savannah, 1849* [Savannah: Edward C. Councill, 1849]).
51. City Council Minutes, 4 May 1818.
52. Of the 1,578 working white women in Savannah in 1860, 798 (50.6 percent) were Irish. Of the remainder, 328 (20.8 percent) were born in Georgia and 273 (17.3 percent) were born elsewhere in the United States. The others were from a number of Western European countries. In contrast, of 228 free black women, 197 (86.4 percent) were from Georgia, 26 (11.4 percent) were from elsewhere in the United States, 3 (1.3 percent) were from the West Indies, and 2 (0.9 percent) were from Africa.
53. Savannah Female Asylum Records, Minutes, 1811–30, GHS.
54. For more on slave hire see Wood, *Women's Work*, 101–21.
55. Exact figures are 269 white servants and 11 free black servants. These figures differ greatly from the findings for Charleston, where in 1848 domestic occupations were deemed exclusively African American. See Pease and Pease, *Ladies, Women and Wenches*, 51–53.
56. 1860 *Census*.
57. Savannah Cash Book, 1806–10, entry for 29 November 1806, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries, Athens, Georgia. Betty's wages were set at 37 pence per week.
58. In 1820 the immigrant population of Savannah rose rapidly in response to an appeal for laborers to rebuild after the fire of 11 January 1820. See Lockley, *Lines in the Sand*, 36–37, and Edward M. Shoemaker, “Stranger and Citizens: The Irish Immigrant Community of Savannah, 1837–1861” (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1990), 31–43, 73–86.
59. *Savannah Republican*, 8 January 1819, 19 April, 21 May 1820; *Daily Georgian*, 28 January 1820.
60. See advertisements for a cook, washer, and ironer; a pastry cook, washerwoman, and chambermaid; a cook; and a child's nurse in *Daily Georgian*, 27 November 1828 and 12 March 1829; and *Daily Morning News*, 18 December 1854 and 17 May 1860, respectively.
61. See advertisements in *Savannah Republican*, 19 April 1820 (seeking a “cook, washer and ironer, a white person would be preferred”); 26 April 1820 (a “smart white girl” seeking employment); and 17 January 1821 (seeking a cook/chambermaid); in *Daily Georgian*, 21

April 1821 (from a "young woman"); and in *Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser*, 23 June 1821 (wanting a "healthy young white woman of good character" to act as a wet nurse).

62. *Daily Morning News*, 7 June 1860.

63. Forty-five white women and forty-one free black women did laundry work according to the 1860 *Census*.

64. White washerwomen averaged thirty-seven years and free black washerwomen averaged forty-six years, respectively seven and nine years above the average for all working women.

65. Entry for Wednesday, 12 January 1848, in D. Nason, *A Journal of a Tour from Boston to Savannah* (Cambridge, Mass.: D. Nason, 1849), 33

66. These jobs had differing specializations. Dressmakers catered to exclusively female customers, seamstresses to either gender. Milliners made hats and mantua makers made coats.

67. Exact figures are 642 white women (40.7 percent) and 120 black women (52.6 percent).

68. There were 178 white and 9 free black dressmakers and 364 white and 110 free black seamstresses in Savannah in 1860.

69. At least three fugitive bondwomen who had been seamstresses were advertised in Savannah during the 1820s. See the advertisements for Celia, Mary Ann, and Jane in the *Daily Georgian*, 8 January 1825, 13 March 1827, and 12 July 1828, respectively.

70. Petition of Sundry Mechanics of the City of Charleston, General Assembly Papers, 0010 003 1811 00048, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, South Carolina.

71. *Friend to the Family*, 22 March 1849.

72. *Daily Georgian*, 7 March 1849 and 8 March 1850; *Savannah Morning News*, 24 February 1851, 24 February 1855, and 5 March 1857; *Savannah Republican*, 2 March 1858.

73. Lockley, "Crossing the Race Divide: Inter-racial Sex in Antebellum Savannah," *Slavery and Abolition* 18 (1997): 166–70. In 1856 the mayor of Savannah reported that there were 93 white and 105 free black prostitutes, one for every 44 men in the city (William W. Sanger, *The History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes, and Effects throughout the World* [New York: Medical Publishing Company, 1910], 612–13).

Chapter Six

Patient Laborers: Women at Work in the Formal Economy of West(ern) Virginia

BARBARA J. HOWE

Together with the stories of the hundreds of women who are the subjects of other essays in this volume, those of Deborah, the fictional cotton mill picker described by Rebecca Harding Davis, and of Mary C. Key Leech and Elizabeth Key, two successful businesswomen in the clothing trade in western Virginia, enrich our understanding of the roles of white women in the antebellum textile and clothing industries in the Upper South.¹ (For the purposes of this essay, the word "industries" also refers to the work of milliners and dressmakers, who made and sold clothing.)

Deborah, a character in Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills," published in 1861, was a picker at a cotton mill who lived a harsh life in Wheeling, the largest city of western Virginia.² After standing "twelve hours at the spools," she was weak and aching by the time she joined the "crowd of half-clothed women . . . going home from the cotton-mill" about 11:00 P.M. one night.³ There may not have been a real Deborah, but Davis was one of the nation's earliest fiction writers to base her stories in the reality of nineteenth-century urban life (and her descriptions conjure up Dickensian images of a wage worker's life in the textile mills).

Mary C. Key Leech, on the other hand, left a long record of her life as a businesswoman. Her family was from Baltimore, and she started in the clothing business about 1835. Her husband, John, was a merchant tailor in 1839, and Thomas Hughes apprenticed for him. She inherited half of John's estate in 1844 and took over his business. In 1845, although Thomas Hughes conducted the