

Gendered Firsts: A Site Analysis of Historic Edenton, NC

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Abstract

Historic Edenton promotes itself as a town of firsts. This focus locates the visitor's experience in the site's colonial history, and emphasizes North Carolina women's involvement in the Revolution, especially the famous Edenton Tea Party. Since Historic Edenton functions as the entire downtown area, sites that focus on women's history and gender issues remain scattered throughout the town and visitors' spatial engagement with women's history and the events of the Edenton Tea Party occurs in a piecemeal fashion. The site thus lacks a guided narrative that carries women's history from the start of the tour to the end. The creation of such a narrative would promote visitors' full engagement in learning about a variety of women's experiences and the gendered issues they faced during the colonial and antebellum periods in American history. An evaluation of the tour, its specific historic sites, and museum presentations provide valuable insights into cultural assumptions and representations about women in the colonial and antebellum periods. Critiques of historic sites also establish a means of appraising the practices of public historians, and provide opportunities to integrate the historiographies of women's, gender, and public history. Furthermore, such evaluations question the ways in which historic sites, like Edenton, address women's and gender issues in conjunction with themes of race and class. Ultimately, assessments of historic sites create opportunities for improvement and reinterpretation.

Historic Edenton, in Edenton, North Carolina, promotes itself as a town of firsts. The colonial government selected the town as the first capital of the North Carolina in 1722. Edenton also claims several prominent people who filled roles in early United States government and history. These men include Samuel Johnston, first North Carolina Senator; James Iredell, attorney general of North Carolina during the Revolution and justice to the first U.S. Supreme Court; and Joseph Hewes, signer of the Declaration of Independence and first Secretary of the United States Navy. Significantly, the town also hosted the Edenton Tea Party, the first political action taken by women in the British American Colonies during the Revolutionary Period.

This overwhelming emphasis on Edenton's "firsts" orients the visitor's experience of the town's colonial history. Though public historians have included women's involvement in the Revolution, the entire downtown area of Edenton serves as a historic site. Because of this, sites that focus on women's history and gender issues remain scattered throughout the town and visitors' spatial engagement with women's history and the events of the Edenton Tea Party occurs in a piecemeal fashion without any real connection of theme or topic from one site to another. Additionally, the fame of Edenton's colonial past overshadows significant women in later points of Edenton's history, most notably the life and experiences of Harriet Jacobs in the antebellum period. As a result, while women exist centrally in Edenton's narrative of firsts, and the story of the Edenton Tea Party permeates the town, Edenton lacks a cohesive narrative where visitors fully engage in learning about women's experiences and the gendered issues they faced during the colonial and antebellum periods in American history. The evaluation, critique, and transformation of the current guided tour to include and incorporate a variety of women's perspectives establishes one way in which Historic Edenton might make connections between the colonial, Revolutionary and antebellum eras in the town's past.

An evaluation of the tour, its specific historic sites, and museum presentations provides valuable insights into cultural assumptions and representations about women in the colonial and antebellum eras. Critiques of historic sites, like Historic Edenton, establish a means of appraising the practices of public historians, and offer opportunities to integrate the historiography of women's, gender, and public history. They also allow us to ask several significant questions. In what ways do historic sites, like Edenton, address women's and gender issues? Which women does the town memorialize and how? What other choices might local public historians make to help visitors understand the variety of women's experiences? And to what degree can a tour narrative that incorporates women's history change how we understand the entirety of the town's history? Ultimately, evaluations of historic sites create opportunities for improvement and reinterpretation.

Historic Edenton provides a nice variety of ways for visitors to experience the town. Those who being at the Visitor's Center can watch a fifteen-minute video that highlights Edenton's past and the town's transformation from bustling colonial shipping port to its current incarnation as a typical small coastal American community. Visitors short on time can take an hour-long trolley tour that drives past the more significant buildings in Edenton. Another possibility emerges from various brochures that offer self-guided walking tours of the area, or just walking around and visiting all the historic marker signs in the area. Finally, those with the stamina can enjoy an official two to two-and-a-half hour guided walking tour. The last option provides visitors with the greatest depth of knowledge and a tour inside five of the most historic buildings in the town. These include the 1800/1827 Iredell House, the 1736 St. Paul's Episcopal Church, the 1758 Cupola House, the 1767 Chowan County Court House, and the c. 1782 Barker House.¹

¹ This paper analyzes a tour of these five buildings taken on September 29, 2012.

The walking tour begins across the Visitor Center's lot at the 1800/1827 Iredell House. Here, visitors experience the most traditional house museum of all the featured locations. Due to the fact James Iredell, Sr.—attorney general of North Carolina during the Revolution and justice to the first U.S. Supreme Court—built the house, and that his son, James Iredell, Jr., North Carolina Governor and United State Senator, resided there, the site focuses heavily on traditional political history. However, it also operates as a house museum. This allows tour guides to talk about cultural history, including family life, women's roles, servant and slave life, and how homes in the colonial period functioned. While the cultural history interpretation that joins the political history adds to the experience, it does not deviate much from any other colonial house museum tours. In other towns, locations, and house museums, visitors also hear anecdotes about servants and slaves serving their masters dinner from warming cabinets in the dining room, view with children's toys and learn how colonial youth amused themselves, and listen to descriptions and examples of bathroom facilities or chamber pots.

The tour continues down the block and across the street to the 1736 St. Paul's Episcopal Church. Here religion in North Carolina has an opportunity to shine. Women, however, do not play a prominent part in the interpretation of this site. Instead, the famous men buried in the church graveyard and the continued active status of the congregation gets mention. Additionally, the construction, architecture, layout, and preservation of the church receive significant discussion. Left completely unexamined, however, is the gendered implications of religion's power in a community and its effects on women's lives during the colonial era.

A walk to and tour of the 1758 Cupola House follows the visit to the church. Out of all the sites on the tour, the Cupola House deals most directly with the lives of women and their property rights. Built for the last of the Lord's Proprietors, Robert Carteret, the house initially

functioned as the offices of the land grant agent Francis Corbin during Edenton's shipping heyday. From a women's history perspective, the significance of the house and its narrative centers on the passing of property from one generation to another. Women enter the story when Corbin's widow sells the house to the Dr. Samuel Dickenson family. Dr. Dickenson's wife was Elizabeth Penelope Eelbeck Ormond, one of the participants in the Edenton Tea Party.

Descendants of the Dickenson family lived in the Cupola House for 141 years. During this time, many of the owners were unmarried women who then passed ownership of the house to their nieces. This culminated with Tillie Bond, who sold off the paneling in the downstairs to the Brooklyn Museum and prompted the town of Edenton to begin preservation efforts. In addition to the ownership of the Cupola House, guides draw attention to how one young girl left her mark on the house. Sarah Penelope Bond etched in the glass of the upstairs window of the children's room the statement, "When this you see remember me. S.P.B 1835." Thus, through the histories of Elizabeth Penelope Eelbeck Ormond, Sarah Penelope Bond, and Tillie Bond, and the Cupola House women gain the most visibility on the tour.

From the Cupola House, the guide leads visitors to the 1767 Chowan County Court House. Once more, the tour turns to a discussion of the politics, government structure and descriptions of courtroom proceedings. The Court House places, visitors on the official tours at a distinct disadvantage. The guided tour interpretation of the building, the stocks, and jailer's house behind does not incorporate women in the historical narrative. Alternatively, those on a self-guided tour, or with time to return, have the opportunity to read interpretative signs that discuss punishment, race, and slavery in the colonial period. Yet overall, women still have little representation in the interpretation of this site.

Moving from the Court House and along the Albemarle Sound, the tour concludes at the c. 1782 Barker House, home of Penelope Barker, the most well known participant in the Edenton Tea Party. The Tea Party operates as a central component of the town's historic narrative. It also receives promotion as Historic Edenton's fundamental women's history event. By concluding with the Barker House, one would assume that the tour finishes with an account of the Edenton Tea Party that interprets women's lives and the gender dynamics of colonial North Carolina. This does not happen.

In fact, the fifteen-minute video at the Visitor's Center features the story of the Edenton Tea Party most prominently. Additionally, before the tour starts the guide recaps the narrative of the Tea Party. During the tour, a teapot on a cannon pedestal marks the location of the event, although the house where the Tea Party took place no longer exists. Meanwhile, other visual cues and branded materials of the event catch the eye of anyone moving around the small town. All of the symbolism culminates at the Barker House. Here the official tour ends with no further mention of the Tea Party, except to say that the visitor has finally reached Penelope Barker's house and a reminder of her participation in the women's political action. Inside the relocated building, visitors only have access to the first floor, which has been converted into a town gift shop. Insight as to why the women in Edenton decided to pursue political action exists remains absent from the narrative. Additionally, beyond the teapot in a person's side yard and a home turned into a gift shop, no dedicated space to the town's most well-known women's history event emerges.

Together, these five sites provide a specific vision of Edenton's past; one that centers on white upper class men and women who lived in Edenton during the colonial, Revolutionary, and early Republic periods of United States history. The political "glory days" of Edenton garner the

entire spotlight on the tour of the town. Understandably, perhaps, the historic buildings that visitors see and walk through, along with the guide's narrative of Edenton's "firsts," celebrate the people and places that contributed to the formation of North Carolina as colony and later a state, and prominent North Carolinians' involvement in the buildup to the American Revolutionary War.

However, the official tour narrative excludes multiple classes, races, religious affiliations, and significant events in the antebellum period that culminate in the Civil War. Some of the major groups of people missing from the narrative include the Native Americans of the Albemarle Sound, freed blacks and African American slaves, lower class whites and other religious groups such as the Quakers in the colonial period and Catholics in the antebellum period. Most problematic, the current tour narrative leaves visitors with a superficial understanding of the politics of colonial and antebellum women's lives because it does not follow recent trends in women's, gender, and public history historiography.

Women's history and gender scholarship promotes a multi-ethnic, multicultural, intersectional approach toward doing women's history and interpretation. In "What Has Happened Here?: The Politics of Discourse in Women's History and Feminist Politics," Elsa Barkley Brown argues in favor of nonlinear methodologies for thinking and writing about history. She advocates the use of multiple perspectives and interpretations of events in history and politics, and demonstrates that the possibility of this approach only occurs if historians have access to multiple recorded viewpoints. Similarly, Leslie McCall considers the trends in women's history that looks at points of intersectionality between analytical categories that shape women's lives, identities, and their location in public and private spaces. McCall contends that scholars need to learn how to identify and analyze the different social and cultural constructions

that influence women's experiences and have shaped their daily lives in order to create more nuanced studies. In "Brave New Worlds: Women's and Gender History," Kathleen Brown also comments on the frameworks in women's and gender history critiquing practices that produce essentialist or parochial histories and citing specific examples within the context of colonial America scholarship. Brown insists upon comparative frameworks that produce cultural histories that understand gender cross-culturally and in their historical context. Lastly, in exploring the historiography and evolution of the term "separate spheres," Linda Kerber challenges its continued usefulness. Kerber's historiographic account of the language of separate spheres demonstrates that gender histories have moved beyond the need for binary models of critique. Instead, she calls for unpacking the separate spheres metaphor and the use of new language that explains the complexity of human relationships and the physical and psychological spaces humans occupy. This pushes historians to consider women's spaces as a site of more than just domesticity and the private realm. Collectively, these scholars call for expanding women's and gender history in order to create multi-dimensional narratives that incorporate as much as possible of the specific contexts of women's experiences and the relationship one group of women to another.²

Methodological advances similar to the ones proposed by these scholars' call for intersectional and spatially-aware women's and gender histories also occur in public history scholarship. In this context, it applies to the development, interpretation, and constructions of historic sites. Lonnie Bunch's article, "Embracing Controversy: Museum Exhibitions and the Politics of Change," provides one salient example of this shift in public history to represent more

² Elsa Barkley Brown, "'What Has Happened Here': The Politics of Discourse in Women's History and Feminist Politics," *Feminist Studies* 18 no. 2 (1992):295-312; Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," *Signs* 30 no. 3 (2005); Kathleen Brown, "Brave New Worlds: Women's and Gender History" *William and Mary Quarterly* 50 (April 1993): 311-328; and Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Sphere, Female Worlds, Women's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History" *Journal of American History* 75 (June 1984): 620-647.

diverse histories. Bunch believes that museums should strive to present exhibits that inspire controversy. He suggests that by encouraging controversy, museums might draw attention to the “messiness and ambiguity of America’s past.” Bunch positions the museum alongside concurrent historiographical and methodological discussions of multiculturalism, difference, and power and authority in institutions. Taking Bunch’s argument one step further, an exhibit or historic site that explores and interprets women’s and gender history from an intersectional perspective could offer another way to produce a narrative that inspires a more complex understanding of place and power in the past.³

Most controversial is the reality of the intersections of gender and race in colonial North Carolina via the regulation of women’s sexuality. Historian Kirsten Fischer demonstrates in her work, *Suspect Relations*, that the regulation of women’s sexuality reflected colonial men’s attempts in North Carolina also to control social relationships between white colonizers, Native American neighbors, and the white and people of color in servitude during this time. These regulations remained as mundane as writing and passing laws regulating women’s speech, but also pushed boundaries through suggestive drawings about native women and slaves. As a result, inviting the regulation of women’s sexuality into the tour discussion and providing explanations as to how white men implemented regulation of women’s sexuality might not always be suitable for children and could possibly offend many adults. To successfully conduct such a tour would rely on the practice and skill of the site interpreter’s reading of the visiting audience.⁴

To include women of color and lower class women means that Historic Edenton would also need to explore controversy, which operates for some as education and as activism for

³ Lonnie Bunch, “Embracing Controversy: Museum Exhibitions and the Politics of Change” *The Public Historian* 14 no. 3 (1992): 62-65.

⁴ Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonia North Carolina* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

others. This would undoubtedly impact the town's tourism industry. Those seeking ways to incorporate controversy must acknowledge that visitors to Historic Edenton arrive with particular viewpoints about the site and expectations for their tour experience that will probably remain at odds with an interpretation that centers on women and gender. Expectations from visitors about interpretations of women's history, especially during the colonial and Revolutionary period, include hearing about life in the home, the social aspects of visits and calling on neighbors, child rearing, relationships between master and servant or slave, and the homespun activities that women participated in during the war. Whether they recognize it or not, tourists expect to learn about the life of the upper classes, not the hardships of life specific to the lower classes. Nor do visitors anticipate learning about classism and racism in the home, and the "radical" politics of women. When site interpreters do present these alternative narratives, they often meet resistance and hostility from their audience. Even so, a more focused study of a variety of women in Edenton's past provides both an affirmation of women's roles in the colonial and antebellum South and, at the least, an opportunity to make visitors reconsider and readjust their thinking about which stories are and should be told in mainstream history.

While Historic Edenton suffers from its one dimensional interpretation, it has a few distinct advantages over other historic sites attempting the incorporation of a more intersectional women's or gender history. One resides in the narrative of women's history Edenton has already established. Changes to the narration and the creation of a specific location in which interpreters might talk about and contextualize the Edenton Tea Party would only enhance the tour without drastically challenging people's expectations of the site. Another advantage rests in the diversity of people currently ignored. Locations such as the Iredell House, the Court House, and St. Paul's Episcopal Church already preserve the history of Edenton. These locations, however, might

benefit from an interpretive inclusion of freed blacks, slaves, women, Quakers and Catholics. Moreover, Historic Edenton could readily extend its timeline to the antebellum period. This action places James Iredell, Jr. in his appropriate historical context, but also paves the way for interpreters to talk about freed blacks, slavery, and the events surrounding Harriet Jacobs, author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*—a narrative currently included but separate from the official, guided walking tour. Lastly, scholarship by historians such as Kirsten Fischer, Rosemarie Zagari, and Ray Raphael demonstrates that each of these silenced groups have a history in the Albemarle Sound, already researched, but waiting for an application to real world situations. Public historians and site interpreters just have to dig a little deeper to unearth the necessary site-specific histories.⁵

In the case of the Iredell House, the current interpretation of indentured servitude, freed blacks and slavery receives limited treatment, even though the house museum provides more opportunities for their incorporation. Kirsten Fischer's *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina*, for example, reveals the sexual vulnerability of servant women in early American history. She draws attention to the regulation of white and African American women's sexuality as a means of maintaining social order and shows that it often took the form of sexual violence. Such regulation extended to a master's right to control his servants' and slaves' marriage prospects, the creation of laws that enforced an extension of labor contracts if white servant women became pregnant, and acts of coercion by masters to gain possession of the labor of servant and slave women's children. Although best suited for adult audiences, Fischer's work could find its way into house museum interpretations. Indeed the white elite

⁵Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written By Herself, Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009); Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations*; Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); and Ray Raphael, Chapter 3 "Women" (2001).

colonial household offers one of the best sites for exploring controversial and violent relationships between men and women of difference classes and races. At the very least, these narratives need to highlight the diverse power relationships that existed under any one roof and among neighbors. Such a narrative creates moments of snap decision-making and the potential of controversy for the site interpreter as they figure out how to tailor their examples of these regulations in an appropriate manner to the ages and sensibilities of their audience.⁶

The only existing interpretation of the lives of the people who lived in the Iredell House—but, did not own it—resides in the dining room. Here a discussion of food preparation and warming techniques, with the accompanying acknowledgement that servants or slaves commonly performed these tasks, takes center stage. Further attention to the non-home owning residents comes in an explanation of the room's second door. Visitors learn that Iredell House, like other homes of the era, did not have an attached kitchen and that the second door opens to the outside, where servants and slaves would have traversed the distance between the kitchen and the main house. Calling attention to the door, rather than the labor of preparation and carrying of the food to and from the table, downplays the hardship of service and slavery in the colonial and antebellum period. Instead, visitors must imagine it for themselves.

This brief reference to servants and slaves provides an opening for further interpretation of the life and labor throughout the colonial and antebellum periods. Like other historic sites, the Iredell House has additional outbuildings such as smokehouses, lavatories, barns, and a kitchen, currently undergoing restoration and preservation. Consequently, site interpreters already have a set of buildings that afford an arena to discuss the lives of freedmen and women, indentured servitude, and slavery before they even bring visitors into the Iredell House. Unfortunately, Historic Edenton has not grabbed this opportunity to extend their narrative.

⁶ Fischer, *Suspect Relations*, 101-110.

Alternatively, if Historic Edenton decided to embrace controversy later in the tour, the Iredell House still offers a compelling site of interpretation for women's "public" and "private" lives. A more site-specific inclusion of Hannah Iredell would bring women into the focus of a narrative that relies heavily on the name recognition of its male subjects—James Iredell, Sr. and James Iredell, Jr. However, as the wife and mother of these men, and sister to Samuel Johnston—another prominent figure in Colonial Edenton—Hannah Iredell held a position of power in Edenton. At the same time, she was subject to the glare of public scrutiny due to her relationships with well-known men. Therefore, Hannah Iredell's power resided predominately in the home that visitors currently tour.

Hannah Iredell did not contribute to the Edenton Tea Party in 1774. Despite this fact, her lack of participation received the same amount of commentary between men as her involvement would have garnered. In *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic*, Rosemarie Zagari writes, "In acknowledging women's importance to the cause, men affirmed women's capacity to act as political agents. Their actions not only affected the fates of individual families but also had an impact on the course of the war, politics, and society." The Edenton Tea Party, possibly the first site of the political action by women in the American Revolution, brought women to the forefront of colonial politics. Significantly, while Hannah Iredell did not participate in the event, her sisters and sister-in-law's names appeared on the letter produced by the women who did. It was the name Johnston—Hannah's maiden name and that of her extended family members—that drew the attention and commentary of her husband's brother, Arthur Iredell back in England. Iredell wrote, "[...] are any of my sister's relations patriotic heroines? Is there a female Congress at Edenton too? I hope not for we Englishmen are afraid of the male Congress, but if the ladies, who have ever since the Amazonian Era, been

esteemed the most formidable enemies, if they, I say should attack us, the most fatal consequence is to be dreaded.” This commentary invokes anxieties about white womanhood, and proper gender, class, and race roles. It also demonstrates the difference between notions of patriotism in the colonies and England, for where Iredell sees the Edenton women’s actions as Amazonian, native and crude, leaders in the Americas probably applauded the women’s efforts as positive exhibitions of civilized patriotism by having women wield their purchasing power. Hannah Iredell’s absence from the Edenton Tea Party actually provides interpreters with a breadth of material to consider. One may suppose that Hannah Iredell refrained from participating because she was aware of the impact her actions would have on her husband’s political career and on her feminine reputation, and thus demurred from creating a political identity for herself by refraining from participating in the Edenton Tea Party.⁷

Considering the tension between present day perceptions of public and private life, the reality of these concepts in the colonial period, and the acceptance of contemporary women’s political rights and legitimacy, Hannah Iredell’s elite position provides Historic Edenton with a conduit to educate and challenge the public. It dispels the notion that the rights everyone enjoys today were always accessible to all people. Ironically, Hannah Iredell’s non-participation in the Edenton Tea Party offers interpreters a way to bring discussion of it into the Iredell House, and to complicate visitors’ understanding of women and politics.

At the site of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church the tour guide more readily invited controversy into the narrative in their discussion of the architecture of the church. Discussing the architecture and preservation of the site, the guide pointed out the indoor balconies. He explained that within

⁷ Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 26; State Archives of North Carolina, “1763-1789 American Revolution: James Iredell, Sr., Diary,” *Treasures of the North Carolina State Archives and the State Library of North Carolina*, http://www.archives.ncdcr.gov/exhibits/treasures/1763_1789.html (accessed November 5, 2012); and Raphael, “Women,” 108.

the church prominent families would sit in their pew boxes on the ground floor, while poorer white families would find places to stand on one side of the balcony with freedmen and African American slaves standing opposite. The contextualization of the architecture highlights the connections between race, class, and religion in early North Carolina history. It demonstrates that in North Carolina religion did not belong solely to the purview of literate whites. Instead, such commentary aptly reinforces how spatial arrangements in even the most sacred sites of daily life attempted to reinforce Anglican understandings of race, class, and gender.⁸

Following Bunch's mandate and embracing controversy, interpreters of St. Paul's may also push the narrative of religion beyond the construction of one church, and one religious denomination, where race and class barriers found reflections in the spatial designations of proper places to worship. Incorporating North Carolina's relatively liberal policy and its provisions for religious dissenters, interpreters could shed light on the politics of religion in the colony and on how religion influenced gendered notions of respectability. St. Paul's, an Episcopal Church, with connections to an Anglican tradition, could thereby function as a space to discuss the colonial tension between Anglicans, Quakers, and notions of proper womanhood.

In her discussion of gender and the construction of race in North Carolina, Fischer draws attention to how the colony's liberal religious policy paved the way for Quaker settlements. The increase in Quaker settlement in North Carolina provoked anxiety amongst the Anglican settlers, because Quakers afforded women much more equality and leadership in the church than Anglicans. Fischer states, "Quaker women thus had a formalized and regular means of making decisions that shaped their community. They also had an identity apart from their familial responsibilities." She also notes, "Quakers departed most radically from inherited English norms with their perception of gender as irrelevant to spiritual authority." In addition to anxieties about

⁸ Fischer, *Suspect Relations*, 1-11.

gender roles, Anglican settlers in North Carolina became troubled with Quaker politics. The Quaker's practice of pacifism prevented them from aiding their neighbors who also fought Native Americans in the Albemarle region, and Quaker's promotion of anti-slavery sentiment created even more ideological distance between the Quakers and their neighbors, even when the physical distance was not that great.⁹

Currently, ten minutes north of Edenton, the Newbold-White House—a home and possible meetinghouse for Quakers built around 1730—provides a complementary site to St. Paul's Episcopal Church while also underscoring the close quarters of the Anglican and Quaker communities. This becomes an especially salient observation when remembered in the context of Edenton's colonial power—as the colonial capital in 1722 and site of the Edenton Tea Party in 1774. Therefore, in addition to observations about who sat or stood where inside St. Paul's, an embrace of religious controversy unique to North Carolina in the colonial era sheds some light on the development of colonial notions of proper womanhood, race, and class in Edenton. It would teach visitors that even if women in the Episcopal Church were not allowed to interpret scripture or claim spiritual authority, the nearby Quaker women could. In a colony where elite white men struggled to solidify their power, the geographical proximity of this distinctly gendered threat brought white women to the forefront of religious and political thought and shaped colonial constructions of gender.¹⁰

The Cupola House could extend its narrative from the colonial period through the antebellum era, and into the present if necessary. Currently, it also operates as a space for discussion about the Edenton Tea Party. The exploration of the house's ownership, passing from one woman to another, and the story of Sarah Penelope Bond etching the glass highlights the

⁹ Fischer, *Suspect Relations*, 42-54.

¹⁰ Fischer, *Suspect Relations*, 42-54.

transformation of women's politics and place in society from the Edenton Tea Party to their roles in antebellum reform.

Starting with the narrative of the house's ownership, site interpreters call attention to the women who participated in the Edenton Tea Party. One participant included Dr. Dickenson's wife, Elizabeth P. Ormond, a relative of Penelope Barker and eventual owner of the Cupola House. Elizabeth Ormond's name appears beside other prominent North Carolina families, such as the Blounts, the Dawsons, the Johnstons, and the Haughtons. An inclusion of an analysis and interpretation of these women by guides returns visitors to the previous discussion of women and politics. It expands the interpretation from one specific woman who did not participate—Hannah Iredell—to an analysis of a group of women, who for a moment in time saw themselves and were seen by others as political actors. Zagarri argues, "Although the Revolution did not necessarily radicalize women, it did politicize them in ways and to an extent that had never before occurred.... No longer were they politically invisible." In support of this statement, Ray Raphael writes, "Women had been invited to joining the political arena, albeit in a limited fashion, and many accepted the invitation."¹¹

Hearing about the events in Boston, experiencing the same concerns about rights and economics as men, and responding to the call for patriotic support, educated and literate women in North Carolina decided to demonstrate their patriotism by writing a letter that declared their intent to boycott British tea and goods. Accounts of the event survive only in British records, but Learn NC provides an extract of the letter that the women wrote. In it, the women profess, "... a duty which we owe, not only to our near and dear connections who have concurred in them, but to ourselves who are essentially interested in their welfare, to do everything as far as lies in our power to testify our sincere adherence to the same" as the reasoning behind their political action.

¹¹ Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 26; and Raphael, "Women," 111.

As Zagarri suggests, this political action occurred not only because of women's subservience to and support of men, but also because they saw it as a duty to themselves to exercise their rights and voice their support.¹²

This analysis and interpretation of women's political power, especially the power of the owner of the Cupola House, contrasts nicely with the Sarah Penelope Bond's glass etching, "When this you see remember me. S.P.B 1835." Sixty-one years after the Edenton Tea Party, Bond was not as confident in her political power as her foremothers. Consequently, she etched the most physical reminder of her existence with the resources she possessed, a ring and a windowpane, and exhorted future generations, and now visitors, to remember her.

Currently, this windowpane serves as a nice anecdote. A more complex interpretation of this event would consider the transformation of women's "politics" from the colonial to antebellum periods. Zagarri points out, "The specter of Mary Wollstonecraft, the experience of women voting in New Jersey, and the visibility of female politicians provoked fears of a larger transformation in gender roles and relations." She argues that a revolutionary backlash against women and a return to a promotion of republican motherhood and docile femininity pervaded the nation by the 1830s. The Edenton Tea Party provides public historians with an opportunity to extend Zagarri's analysis and apply its effects to the Cupola House. With the notion of a revolutionary backlash in mind, visitors learn of the dampening of women's influence in formal politics, and could understand better the desperation in Sarah Penelope Bond's plea of remembrance.¹³

Beyond the controversy surrounding women's politics, the interpretation of the Chowan County Court House establishes once more the controversial links between race, class, and

¹² Learn NC, "2.7 The Edenton 'Tea Party,'" *North Carolina Digital History*, <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-revolution/4234#comment-1070> (accessed November 14, 2012).

¹³ Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 182.

punishment in colonial and antebellum North Carolina. Here again, the historic site may improve its existing content. Historic markers and signs in front of the jailer's house and the stocks behind the courthouse provide all the information needed to talk about crime, punishment, race, and slavery.

The "Colonial Punishment" marker starts by stating, "Punishment in the colonial era focused on public humiliation...." However, this sign only focuses on the forms of male punishment that occurred in colonial North Carolina. Returning to Fischer's work, public historians find examples of punishments for women that included whippings, forced apologies, ducking stools, and being carted around town. She emphasizes that especially in the case of misspeaking women, the punishment reflected the nature and implications of a woman's crime—the pushing of boundaries beyond acceptable womanly respectability. By incorporating narratives of women's punishments alongside those of men, and emphasizing how the punishments were similar because they focused on public humiliation, Historic Edenton could place women in a traditionally male context and environment and demonstrate that women suffered harsher punishment for violating gender norms than men.¹⁴

Additionally, tour guides should take cues from the sections on "Punishment and Race," and "Slave Rebellion" on the signs and markers behind the Court House in order to find a way to introduce and talk about the radicalized components of punishment. These sections draw attention to the vastly different responses by white men to crimes committed by other white men and crimes committed by slaves. They highlight the system of "slave codes" and the unjust jailing of nineteen slaves in Edenton in response to Nat Turner's 1831 Rebellion nearby in Virginia. Additionally, the markers mention the town's most famous slave, Harriet Jacobs. A

¹⁴ North Carolina Historic Sites, "Colonial Punishment" marker, September 29, 2012; and Fischer, *Suspect Relations*, 136-139.

good site interpretation would take into account these markers and use them to provide people with more information about the punishment colonial women experienced for “talking back” and pushing the bounds of womanly respectability, and about Harriet Jacobs. Specific to the signs on “Punishment and Race,” interpreters may possibly draw connections between the sign’s contextual evidence and Jacobs’ decision to first remain hidden in an attic for seven years, and her later decision to “talk back” by writing autobiography about her life and experiences in slavery and in hiding.¹⁵

Moving from the outside into the Court House, interpreters might once more turn to the work and sources used by Fischer draw attention to women’s experiences with the court system. Fischer predominately uses lower court records from the Albemarle Sound “to understand how people negotiated sexual relations.” She observes that these records provide the most cases pertaining to women because such cases never made it to the higher courts. The Chowan County Court House stands as just one site where some of these lower court proceedings that involved women took place. Mining the archive for cases against women specific to the Chowan County Court House demonstrates, as Fischer argues, how central women were to the constructions of gender and biological notions of race.¹⁶

Lastly, transforming the Barker House from the site of a tearoom and gift shop to a center on women’s history would cement women in the narrative of Historic Edenton, while also drawing attention to women’s politics in the colonial period. If tour guides returned to a discussion of women’s politics that began at the Iredell House, and had been reviewed at the Cupola House, then concluded it at the Barker House, they could connect the information, concepts and themes from the beginning of the tour to the end. A tour that culminates at the

¹⁵ North Carolina Historic Sites, “Colonial Punishment” marker, September 29, 2012, bell hooks, *Talking Back*; and Jacobs, *Confessions of a Slave Girl*.

¹⁶ Fischer, *Suspect Relations*, 7-8.

Barker House would also acknowledge that the Edenton Tea Party plays an essential component in the formation of Edenton's community identity and its perceptions of women's proper roles in the colonial period. Guides could also revisit the themes of religious anxiety in structuring the town's gender and race relations and in its forms of punishment to round out this narrative. In this way, they would provide a more comprehensive view of continuity and change over time. However, transforming the Barker House from a tearoom and gift shop to a center on women's history indicates a level of dedication to women's history that currently does not exist in the town's approach to public history.

Site interpreters could begin to incorporate women more into such analysis and the creation of a center on women's history at the Barker House. Certainly, the narration of the Edenton Tea Party stands as an exception to traditional Revolutionary accounts of women's political action, but, by drawing on the scholarship of historians such as Rosemarie Zagarri and Ray Raphael—both of whom investigate women's political action during the Revolution outside of the realm of purely homespun acts by upper class white women—Edenton might expand the significance of the Tea Party and the women's actions to encompass the entire town. Zagarri's use of print culture, literacy and education tracks the evolution of women's politics from the beginnings of the Revolution through the Early Republic and the origins of antebellum thought. She demonstrates how patriotic sentiment and need fostered women's politics during the Revolutionary War, but afterwards created a backlash and subjected women to the role of wife and mother of the nation. Such research would complement the reproduction newspaper cartoon that depicts the Edenton Tea Party hanging in the Barker House. Meanwhile, Raphael similarly draws attention to the origins of women's patriotic political identity, but veers off and questions whether all women, in all classes practiced politics the same and with the same fervor throughout

the Revolutionary War. He focuses not only on the efforts of the upper class women who stopped buying tea, but also on the lower class women who struggled to run the farms, feed and clothe their families, and accommodate opposing armies. Through these examples, Raphael demonstrates that women became political and patriotic not only because they wanted to, but because they had to and provides an opening to discuss the lower class women and women of color living in Edenton during the Revolution.¹⁷

While, Historic Edenton proudly proclaims that the women of the Tea Party provided the first political action by women in the Revolution, it does little to explain the significance of the statement, or women's further involvement in the Revolution. An incorporation of Zagari's and Raphael's scholarship creates a more inclusive interpretation of women's experiences in the Revolutionary War. These scholars especially highlight how the argument that women's involvement in the war extended further than homespun activities and that women of different classes experienced war differently depending on their race and class.

Such integration of secondary source material may be further augmented by incorporating primary source material to strengthen the context of place and visuals of the Edenton Tea Party. Guiding visitors to the blown up reproduction of the British Political cartoon that mocked the Edenton Tea Party, making women look like men, and presenting visitors with a post card image of the house where the Tea Party actually took place grounds the event in more factual evidence than currently exists in Edenton. It also moves the narrative away from a propagandized tool of heritage and memory, and into a site of historical interpretation and opens up discussions about the formation of gender and concepts of womanhood and femininity.¹⁸

¹⁷ Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 26; and Ray Raphael, "Women" 107-143; 118.

¹⁸ Edenton Tea Party House, Edenton, No. Carolina. North Carolina Postcard Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

If it makes an effort, Historic Edenton has the space and can find the information necessary to overcome the limits of its current one-dimensional narrative. Each site on the tour has a specific story in a specific time, which ultimately poses challenges to constructing a unifying narrative of the colonial and antebellum periods in North Carolina's history. Using women to connect the home, religion, politics, and the law makes them more visible by demonstrating how various parts of their lives connected and intersected. Moreover, the site needs to focus on the experiences of different women: those who stood in the balcony at St. Paul's Episcopal Church or worshipped in the nearby Quaker Meeting House; those who received corporal punishment designed to publically humiliate them at the Court House while also serving as a lesson to the entire community; the lives that free black women like Harriet Jacobs's grandmother managed to construct for themselves in a slaves society; and the lives of slave women, who unlike Jacobs, never escaped bondage. While women have a role in the interpretation of Historic Edenton, a close look at the site's execution of it reveals its weaknesses and superficiality. A greater contextual analysis and diversity in interpretation might transform Historic Edenton from a superficial site of women's history into an outstanding site of women's history.