Remembering Elderly Women in Early America:

A survey of how aged women were memorialized in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century tombstone inscriptions, death notices, funeral sermons, and memoirs

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(ABSTRACT)

By analyzing the language used in tombstone inscriptions, death notices, funeral sermons, and memoirs, this thesis reviews how cultural expectations placed on women during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries impacted the reputation of aged women. Specifically, it demonstrates how the ideology of domesticity contributed to the reputation of aged women as *women* and how advanced age influenced their exemplary place in society. Ultimately, this thesis argues the concept of gender identity that was influential throughout the life course was magnified in importance during old age.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction: Abigail Waters

In September of 1816, a frail ninety-six-year-old Abigail Waters, who had suffered from multiple strokes and been confined to her bed for nearly a year, lamented, "I know not for what purpose God Continues me here. It seems as if I must be a trouble to all my friends, and could be of no use to any of them."[1] What is interesting about Abigail Waters' words, is that they do not represent despair voiced in the privacy of her personal diary, but are found in a rather public document, entitled *Memoirs of The Life of Mrs. Abigail Waters*, that provides no indication that her "usefulness" was over. Written by Joshua Huntington, Pastor of Boston's Old South church, and published upon Abigail Waters' death in 1817, the *Memoirs* are based on the pastor's personal observations and conversations with Waters during her "long confinement" at the end of life. As an example of religious biography, the despondency detected in Waters' voice deviates from the overall tone of the work, which was intended to inspire and educate Christians and lead nonbelievers to the saving knowledge of Christ. In the context of this genre, the purpose was not to depress, but to enliven the spirits of readers by telling the spiritual journey of an exemplary Christian from birth to death. Most importantly, the author's preoccupation with physical decline in old age was meant to emphasize Abigail Waters' reliance on God, not her reliance on others, even in the most desperate of situations.

What was Abigail Waters' and other aged women's "use" in old age? The very fact that the *Memoirs* were published as a didactic religious piece speaks to the importance of elderly women in upholding the virtues of Christianity and those

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[1] Joshua Huntington, *Memoirs of The Life of Mrs. Abigail Waters*, (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong, 1817) 113.

associated with women during the early nineteenth century. The union of feminine virtues and Christian values was not an unusual pairing at that time. Nancy Cott, in *The Bonds of Womanhood*, suggests that during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries it was assumed that women's "natural" tendency toward humility and sensibility made them better Christians than men, whose rational minds made them resistant to religion.[2] The association of religious values and the specific qualities associated with femininity was part of a larger emphasis on the ideology of domesticity promoted in both secular and private writings. In what Barbara Welter termed the "Cult of True Womanhood," women after the American Revolution were held responsible for upholding the moral integrity of the new nation by maintaining the home as a refuge from a sinful world and instilling traditional values to their children. Ultimately for women, it was their gender identity, or the personal significance attached to oneself as a female, that was crucial in the organization and success of the new Republic.[3]

In the context of this ideology of domesticity, the concept of being of "use," or one's "usefulness," is a recurring theme in late eighteenth and early nineteenth -century diary literature written by women. Burdened by daily household chores, yet idealized as the disinterested guardians of home, middle and upper-class white women persistently negotiated conflicting accounts of what it meant to be "useful." As demonstrated by Abigail Waters' despondent words, usefulness is an especially intriguing concept when placed in the context of elderly women's experience. No longer able to continue the arduous daily household routines expected of their sex, aged women continued to the end

[2] Nancy Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood: 'Woman's Sphere' in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 128.
[3] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966), 152.

of life negotiating personal identity from the images of what society expected them to be as *women* despite the physical limitations of old age.

While personal identity emerges as a striking underlying theme of the *Memoirs*, it was not the primary concern of its author nor is it the primary concern of this paper. To Joshua Huntington, Abigail Waters was simply a character in a spiritual drama and a representative model of "true womanhood" and Christianity to which others, especially women, should want to aspire. More importantly, the *Memoirs* suggest that the "image" of Waters as an exemplary Christian superceded any physical handicap she might have had in maintaining the physical demands of her sphere. It did not matter that Waters might have personally felt she was a burden to her family and friends and that she was of "no use" to them in her infirmity. In the most basic terms, Huntington makes Abigail Waters' "useful" after death as the guardian of all that was most admired in her sex and society; she was a devoted mother and grandmother, a cherished friend, and, most importantly, a faithful Christian. It was a life long devotion to the ideals of domesticity and Christianity that made Waters, and other aged women, "useful" models of behavior for a society in the midst of social, economic, and political change after the Revolution. As a representative of an ideal, therefore, Abigail Waters' usefulness in old age, during her confinement, and even after death was much the same as it had been throughout her long life.

Unfortunately, the field of women's history has differentiated little among women according to age, and in doing so historians have abandoned an important segment of the population whose reputation as perfect Christians and guardians of the home upheld this ideology. The importance of age in this example of religious biography can not be over

emphasized. Abigail Waters was not just a “good woman” who upheld the virtues of domesticity, she was a “venerable” aged woman who had perfected the model of femininity over the course of her long life. It was Abigail Waters’ advanced age that gave the *Memoirs* its power and authority as an instructional piece of literature for nonbelievers and a target audience of youth, especially young women. The author even chose an aged Abigail Waters, not a youthful image, for the frontispiece of the biography. The image reveals no physical weaknesses. Abigail Waters was depicted as a resolute and determined Christian *especially* in the last years of her life when illness was her constant companion.

To better understand how gender specific expectations influenced the social reputation of elderly women during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this thesis will explore the language found in memorial literature. Specifically, the sources investigated include tombstone inscriptions, death notices, funeral sermons, and memoirs published after death. Using this approach I have found that the concept of gender difference associated with a prevailing ideology of domesticity was influential throughout the life course and only magnified in importance during old age. Elderly women were not invisible members of society. Instead, as depicted in memorial literature, they were exemplar models of what women should be, namely caring mothers, dutiful wives, and faithful Christians. Elderly women, therefore, did not cease being representatives of their sex. In fact, advanced age served to enhance elderly women’s position of authority over younger women and to make their reputation as *women* even more golden in remembrance literature.

Historians have only recently begun to investigate the significance of the elderly in the past. This chapter, therefore, will situate my research in the literature by explaining the historiography of old age and aging as it relates to the study of aged women in the past.

Literature Review:
Historical Gerontology comes of Age

The world's population has been progressively aging for nearly two centuries, yet only in recent decades has the phenomenon, recognized by demographers as "human population aging," become a topic of worldwide attention. As is true with any long-term social process, the degree and significance of change in the structure of society and in the lives of individuals must be understood as variable, not constant. Population aging is basically the result of reduced fertility and declining mortality over time. In the absence of historical context, however, concern about old age and aging may appear to occur suddenly and unexpectedly. Specifically, in America the aging baby boom generation has created an acute awareness of issues related to aging and old age. Americans as a group are experiencing a kind of collective anxiety about the political, economic, and social implications of a significant elderly population.

While concern about aging may appear to be a recent development, interest in aging, as a biological phenomenon, dates at least to the late eighteenth century and Enlightenment period philosophers. In America, the first gerontologists, specialists in old age and aging, emerged during the late nineteenth century. These pioneers were primarily scientists and physicians interested in studying the aging process for the

purpose of treating, and perhaps curing, what were then viewed as the peculiar “diseases” of old age. Since then, scholars in a number of disciplines outside medicine have responded to a perceived need for solutions to the variegated “problems” associated with an aging world by creating sub-fields devoted specifically to the study of aging and old age.

Historical gerontology, the study of old age and aging in the past, is an example of such a sub-field that appeared during the late 1970s. Interest in aging, a topic that appears to be a concern unique to contemporary society, could easily be dismissed as a fad or an effort by historians to simply capitalize on an issue that currently intrigues public attention. The question that typically haunts historical gerontologists in this scenario is demographic: “Were there elderly people in the past?” In this rather incriminating description of the origins of historical gerontology, public demand for answers to modern day questions produced historians who willingly supplied a past for the elderly, but contributed little to historical understanding per se because the percentage of the aged population in the past was insignificant. The latter demographic critique is particularly directed to historians of the colonial period, a period when it is often assumed that high fertility and mortality rates reduced the likelihood of a significant elderly population.

It is clear that scholarly interest in the lives of elderly people in the past can be, in part, attributed to the broader societal attention given to aging in the modern world. Historians are often interested in exploring how social conditions developed over time and sometimes issues long ignored, such as aging, become obvious only in times of perceived crisis. The assumption, however, that historians of old age simply rely on

contemporary trends to guide questions about the past ignores specific developments in the field of history that facilitated interest in historical gerontology. The most significant development was an interest, during the 1960s, in studying the lives of ordinary people. Social historians, concerned with exploring issues of family structure, demography, and the life cycle, provided a necessary foundation to propel the field of historical gerontology during the late 1970s. Most importantly, it was social historians who first argued that recognition of life stages existed in the past, although most studies were directed to the study of childhood. John Demos recognized the study of old age in the past as a logical progression, or a necessary step, to fill a void in historical scholarship interested in the lives, and life stages, of ordinary people.[4]

In the early stages of development, historical gerontologists positioned their field safely in the realm of social historical studies of the family and life cycle. It is obvious, however, from the structure of their work that they were preoccupied with addressing skeptics who questioned the numerical significance of the aged in the past. Suspicions about the motivation behind studying aging in the past and the demographic merits of such scholarship were not blatant in the literature. It was, however, persistently implied by scholars who found it necessary to defend the new field with tedious demographic analysis of population structures, life expectancy ratios, mortality and fertility rates. As a result of this trend, the first generation of historical gerontologists could best be categorized as demographers; also a kind of social historian. John Faragher, for example, in his article "Old Women and Old Men in Seventeenth-Century Wethersfield, Connecticut," provides evidence that as early as the seventeenth century a considerable

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[4]John Demos, *Past, Present, and Personal: The Family and the Life Course in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 139.

number of persons in New England lived to be at least sixty years old. Despite the title, however, Faragher contributes little to understanding how life expectancy influenced gender roles.[5]

The primary contribution demographic studies made to the field of historical gerontology is that such analysis made it possible for the elderly to be studied in their own right. Demographic studies demonstrated that once individuals survived childhood the likelihood of survival to old age was great. A convincing discussion of old age and aging in the past, especially during the colonial period, could not have occurred in the absence of demographic analysis. In response to initial doubters, demographic evidence also demonstrated that elderly persons existed in the past and were represented in significant numbers in at least some communities.[6]

Once the topic of research itself, demographic evidence now serves as a motivator for contemporary researchers by revealing significant gaps in the literature. Most recently, women's historians in the 1990s have cited demographics, particularly the historical predominance of elderly women to elderly men, as a rationalization for studies that focus on aged women. Demographic evidence, therefore, has proved valuable in setting the stage for studies about the elderly in the past and absolutely crucial in defining who is being studied.

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[5] John Faragher. "Old Women and Old Men in Seventeenth-Century Wethersfield, Connecticut," *Women's Studies* 4 (1976), 11-31.

[6] See David Hackett Fischer, *Growing Old in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 222-229, for a comprehensive account of the mortality rates in New England and the Middle colonies. The data indicates that there was considerable regional variation. In 1790, 11-14% of the total population in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania lived to be 60 years of age while 12-17% of residents in Salem, Massachusetts survived to age sixty. Fischer indicates that survival to old age was less likely in the the South, yet provides no statistical proof that this was the case.

While demographic analysis was important in adequately setting the stage for historical gerontology, initial preoccupation with defending the *existence* of aged persons retarded the investigation of a more engaging historical question; studying the *meaning* of old age and aging in the past. Specifically, the negative influence of demographic analysis was the tendency to treat the elderly as a group with little regard for the impact of race, class, and gender. Treatment of the elderly as a homogeneous group was especially problematic for historians interested in women's history.

In presenting this literature review as a way of situating my thesis in the historiography, the following critique is from the perspective of placing women in the history aging. The works represent classics in the sense that they were the earliest attempts to present a model of aging in the past and exhibited influential methodology that inspired the direction of later historians. As will be seen, as historians moved from demographics to understanding the essential meaning of old age in the past, many did so in an asexual universe. A survey of the classics will demonstrate that early attempts to recover the history of the elderly as a group subsumed the unique and valuable story of aged women in the past. Ultimately, the concept of gender identity and identity in old age were never topics of discussion, and as members of an asexual universe created by historians the elderly, as a group, were considered asexual as well.

Gender Identity and Historical Gerontology

Pioneering scholars in the field of historical gerontology largely excluded gender as a category of analysis by offering the history of old age as a simple narrative of the rise and fall of public power. David Hackett Fischer presented the first influential historical

model of old age and aging in his book, *Growing Old in America* (1977). Fischer argued that the elderly were venerated in the years before the American Revolution but rapidly lost status in its aftermath as a new generation, infused with a spirit of liberty and equality, renounced the authority of their elders. In the context of Fischer's study, authority and power are both predominately male measures of public status. Fischer could not include women in his story of a colonial gerontocracy because colonial females did not possess political power. In fact, the model only applies to wealthy, white men. Any effort to include elderly women only weakened his argument. For example, Fischer discovered that the condescending language used to describe aged women predated the American Revolution when "the elderly" were presumably held in high esteem.[7]

While the model Fischer presented was flawed, the fact that he was the first historian to give extensive attention to the history of old age is significant and later historians would be influenced by his methodology and emphasis on status. Andrew Achenbaum argued in his book, *Old Age in the New Land: The American Experience since 1790* (1978), that the elderly experienced a decline in status but suggested it occurred in the aftermath of the Civil War, not the American Revolution, as Fischer had claimed. Achenbaum argued that the "infant republic depended upon the commitment and ability of men and women of all ages to work together in creating a new society."[8] According to Achenbaum, the elderly were exemplars of "healthy longevity," "guardians of virtue," and pillars of wisdom in their communities. The elderly were consequentially made "obsolete" in the years between 1865 and 1914 with the medicalization of old age

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[7] Fischer, *Growing Old In America,* 93.
[8] W. Andrew Achenbaum, *Old Age in the New Land: The American Experience since 1790* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 9.

and their withdrawal from the labor force. Once again, however, women were largely excluded from the history of old age.

In 1983, Carol Haber published *Beyond Sixty-Five: The Dilemma of Old Age in America's Past*. In the tradition of Fischer and Achenbaum, Haber presents a macro history of aging, arguing that the bureaucratization of old age classified persons sixty-five and older as obsolete. Haber bases her analysis primarily on men's entry into retirement during the late nineteenth century, but suggests that there were always elderly individuals who were "characterized as useless" and subject to "ridicule and shame."[9] Examples of such superannuated individuals in the colonial period included references to poor women, but her master narrative about the transition of persons into a categorical old age discounts the role elderly women played because in women's sphere sixty-five and retirement did not necessarily mean a change in status.

While it is interesting that few of these pioneering scholars in the field of historical gerontology sought to include the experiences of aged women, the more urgent issues facing the field are why and should it matter. There is considerable debate among scholars about the reason elderly women have largely been excluded from the history of old age and aging. Initial efforts argued that ignoring the history of elderly women was simply a symptom of the neglect women's history has received from historical scholarship in general.[10] The problem with this interpretation is that it discounts the fact that scholars of women's history also ignored elderly women. Peter Stearns, in his article, "Old Women: Some Historical Observations," recognizes that interest in

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[9] Carole Haber, *Beyond Sixty-Five: The Dilemma of Old Age in America's Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 125.
[10] For this interpretation see, Marjorie Chary Feinson, "Where are the Women in the History of Aging?" *Social Science History* 9 (Fall 1985), 429-452.

women's history did little to enhance the visibility of aged women in the past. Stearns attributes this anomaly to intergenerational conflict, suggesting that the first generation of students in women's history were more concerned with issues facing their own age group than those impacting older cohorts.[11] Monique Stavenuiter and Karin Bijsterveld agree with the intergenerational conflict theory, arguing that "the first historians working in the field of women's history were probably not interested in old age as such, because they rather wished to oppose the elder generation."[12]

Historians of British history concur with the intergenerational conflict theory, arguing that women during the eighteenth century have not been perceived as useful role models for contemporary women because they were understood to be powerless against a repressive social system that favored male authority. In fact, as Bridgett Hill suggests in *Eighteenth-Century Women: An Anthology*, most women did not "heroically" struggle against the system but "unquestioningly conformed to the role assigned to them."[13] It is easy to understand then why aged women, in particular, have been excluded from contemporary historical narratives. As women of the eighteenth century they were perceived as powerless, but as *aged* women they were especially viewed according to modern-day stereotypes as weak and too set in their ways to provide an inspiring story for young women.

It seems that there are more practical arguments to be made concerning the dearth of material devoted to aged women in the past. In his 1978 article, "Old Age in Early New England," John Demos argues that the evidence for elderly women is simply "too

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[11] Peter Stearns, "Old Women: Some Historical Observations," *Journal of Family History* (Spring 1980), 44.
[12] Monique Stavenuiter and Karin Bijsterveld, "Introduction: Long Lives, Silent Witnesses-Elderly Women in the Past," *Journal of Family History* 25 (April 2000), 196.

meager" to conclude that males and females aged differently in the past.[14] Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, who traces the life of Martha Ballard into her old age in *A Midwife's Tale*, likened the frustration of researching women's lives to "looking for needles in haystacks of male prose."[15] Indeed, women are not as prevalent in the legal record as men, fewer left behind extensive personal records, and they are nearly invisible from the "head of household" census category commonly used by historians as a measure of status. Certainly, aged women appear in wills left by their husband, but few wills indicate what society thought about elderly women as a group. Clearly, traditional methodology used to evaluate the elderly in early America simply is not appropriate when the subject is female. Alternative sources must be embraced and new questions asked of old evidence if elderly women are to be included in the history of aging.

The predominately male model of aging, based largely on public power or a withdrawal from it, does not account for the experiences of elderly women who were denied such a presence. The first scholars in the field recognized that women's experience did not fit into their theories of aging, but few explored the question more extensively. Andrew Achenbaum suggests that "studying the past can help us to understand the predicament of older people in contemporary American society. Applying the lessons of history might lead to better evaluations of current options and to sounder

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[13] Bridget Hill, *Eighteenth-Century Women: An Anthology* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 3.
[14] John Demos, "Old age in early New England," in *Past, Present, and Personal: The Family and The Life Course in American History* (New York 1986), 141.
[15] Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Of Pens and Needles: Sources in Early American Women's History," *The Journal of American History* 77 (June 1990), 200.

preparations for future possibilities."[16] If women are to benefit from the findings of historical gerontology they must first be recognized as important contributors to its story.

More recent historians working in the field of women's history have made efforts to place women in the history of aging by asking a different set of questions regarding "the elderly" in the past. For women historians, the central question is not about the rise and fall of public power but how women's unique experience in old age was influenced by their identity, as women, over time. History is so often defined in terms of events that it sometimes misses the importance of identity in explaining how people related to each other in the past. The concept of identity in women's history is an important contribution to historical gerontology because it demands that the study of aging be placed not only in a social context, but in an individual context as well. The shift from questions of long-term historical changes in status to questions of identity and social relationships is an important one because it signifies how far historical gerontology has moved toward understanding what it actually meant to grow old in the past.

While women's history, as a field of study, has the potential to contribute a new perspective to historical gerontology, there are few historians who can be considered authorities on the subject of women and aging in the past. The only example cited in most studies of aged women, and old age in general because of its innovative perspective, is Terri L Premo's, *Winter Friends: Women Growing Old the New Republic, 1785-1835*. Premo argues that women developed "webs of connection" with family and friends throughout the life course, enabling them to sustain a strong sense of identity into their old age. The author illustrates how elderly women were awarded privileged status

[16] Achenbaum, 6.

through relationships with their spouse, children, grandchildren, and friends. [17] Premo's work is exceptional because of her use of an extensive collection of letters and diary literature written by women from the period. It is a collection of sources that will surely silence skeptics who doubt the existence of such evidence. The book is also unique because in contrast to the pioneering scholars in the field, who argue "the elderly" experienced a decline in status, Premo discovers that women experienced a remarkable degree of continuity in their lives as they maintained a social network of friends and relatives into old age. In addition, Premo's work is special because it recognizes the importance of the ideology of womanhood in contributing to the social identity of aged women during the late eighteenth century.[18]

Specific case studies that include the story of elderly women in American history include Paula Scott's article, "'Tis Not the Spring of Life with Me': Aged Women in their Diaries and Letters, 1790-1830" (1995). This article investigates the challenges elderly women in Connecticut faced as they attempted to reconcile increasing infirmity with the demands of daily living. It is interesting to note that Scott expanded her original research about elderly women into a larger monograph entitled *Growing Old In the Early*

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[17] Terri Premo, *Winter Friends: Women Growing Old in the New Republic, 1785-1835* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 10.

[18] The scarcity of extensive studies specifically devoted to elderly women in the past should not discredit the fact there have been several notable case studies that warrant attention for their inclusion of aged women. Joy Day and Richard Buel present a fascinating story of the life of Mary Fish, in *The Way of Duty: A Woman and Her Family in Revolutionary America* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984. This work is not specific to the final years of Mary's life, but in retelling her entire life course, using information primarily gleaned from her letters and journal, readers can gain insight into how old age related to other life stages in the eighteenth century. Similarly, Elaine Crane, in "The World of Elizabeth Drinker" *The Pennsylvania Magazine* 57 (January 1983), 3-28, explores the life of this elite Quaker matron into her old age, using information from her diary. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, made the life course of Martha Ballard famous among historians in her book, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on her Diary, 1785-1812* (1991). These works are significant for historical gerontologists because they illustrate the possibility of understanding the history of aging from the perspective of individual experience. Placing individual narratives at the center of historical research can provide significant insight into how old age related to other life stages by placing the story in both a social and personal context.

Republic: Spiritual, Social, and Economic Issues, 1790-1830 (1997), a work that does not devote specific attention to the experiences of aged women primarily because it is based in the same time period as Terri Premo's groundbreaking book, *Winter Friends*.[19]

There are significant case studies concerning elderly women in areas of scholarship outside American history. Edgar-Andre Montigny, in "Ornamental Non-Entities?: Older Women, Historians and the Writings of Ellen Osler and Wilmot Cumberland" (1997), suggests that nineteenth-century elderly women in Canada were active and powerful contributors to their family and communities. Susannah R. Ottaway, in "Providing for the Elderly in Eighteenth-Century England" (1998), argues that elderly women benefited from the expectation that families were to be the primary providers of care. Sherri Klassen explores living conditions in her article, "Old and Cared For: Place of Residence for Elderly women in Eighteenth-Century Toulouse" (1999). Pat Thane, in "'An Untiring Zest for Life': Images and Self-Images of Old Women in England" (2000), argues that aged women were not always the objects of negative stereotypes and were often well respected. Pat Thane, in association with Lynn Botelho, has also edited an exceptional collection of essays related to aging women entitled *Women and Aging in British Society Since 1500* (2001). In general, European scholarship tends to emphasize the place of aged women in society by focusing on family structure, welfare, and residence patterns.[20]

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[19] Other notable case studies include Terri Premo's article, "'Like A Being Who Does Not Belong': The Old Age of Deborah Norris Logan" *The Pennsylvania Magazine* 57 (January 1983), 85-112; Marla Miller's article, "'My Part Alone': The World of Rebecca Dickinson, 1787-1802" *New England Quarterly* 71 (September 1998), 341-377. Both works represent exceptional examples of placing old age in both an individual, life course perspective, and a social context.

[20] One notable exception is Anne Kugler's article, "'I feel myself decay apace': Old Age in the Diary of Lady Sarah Cowper, 1644-1720" in *Women and Ageing in British Society since 1500*, Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane eds., (Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2001). This article investigates the personal reflections of an aging English aristocrat.

Historical gerontology has obviously begun to accept women as a reputable part of its narrative, but few of these scholars have successfully analyzed the role of aged women from the perspective of gender identity, or how old age was experienced as a function of femininity. Part of this neglect may be traced to a broader debate in the field between the merits of social and cultural history. David Troyansky, in "Progress Report: The History of Old Age in the Western World," identifies the source of conflict as the "juxtaposi[tion] of social experience and cultural representations."[21] Social historians, interested in the social experience of aging, focus their efforts primarily on issues related to family structure and where the elderly fit into this framework. This perspective can be attributed to the field's roots in studies of the family and the case study approach, as demonstrated in both American and European scholarship, is largely based on this methodology. In describing the "experience" of old age social historians also include questions related to status; this approach might best be understood as a macro view of how the elderly fit into society as a whole. As demonstrated in the earliest examples of historical gerontology, this perspective is based on public evidence emphasizing the rise and fall of power, a pattern that does not necessarily illustrate the female experience.[22]

In contrast to social historians, cultural historians are interested in ideas about aging and how societies construct meaning about old age over time. One of the best examples of a cultural approach to historical gerontology is Thomas Cole's *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America* (1992). This work traces in literature and art the transition from largely existential questions about aging to scientific theories.

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[21] David Troyansky, "Progress Report: The History of Old Age in the Western World" *Ageing and Society* 16 (1996), 236.

[22] Terri Premo, in *Winter Friends*, suggests that the status of women during the late eighteenth century may be interpreted as more continuous using private documents, such as diaries and letters.

Few case studies involve a purely cultural approach because of the difficulty in tracing such ideas across time and space in a focused narrative. The absence of larger works concerning representations of aging may be attributed to criticism about the sources cultural historians use: literature and art, for example, are not considered reliable indicators of how the elderly actually lived their lives. The social historical perspective, measuring indicators of status with "real world" evidence, is considered the more appropriate position to take in a world currently grappling with the social, economic, and political ramifications of a significant elderly population.

Moving the field beyond the initial question, "did elderly people exist," to exploring what such age structures meant to people in the past must include the perspective of cultural historians. Cultural historians are even providing insight into explaining the essential definition of old age in the past, something early demographic studies rarely explored. Was old age considered a normal part of the life cycle during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries? Howard Chudacoff, in *How Old Are You? Age Consciousness in American Culture* (1989), suggests that age distinctions in general were "blurred" before 1850 and the advent of age was related to divisions in institutions, such as schools.[23] The bureaucratic institution of age grading, however, does not necessarily mean that people before that time did not acknowledge the importance of age in the organization of society. Andrew Achenbaum, in *Old Age in the New Land: The American Experience since 1790* (1978), argues that Americans have always perceived

[23] Howard Chudacoff, *How Old Are You? Age Consciousness in American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) 20-28.

old age to be a distinct phase in the life cycle and that the chronological boundaries of old age have remained relatively stable.[24]

Defining "old" is especially complicated when the subject is women. Terri Premo suggests that the defining "old" is nearly impossible because it is so loosely specified, even in contemporary society. Most women in the past considered themselves old at sixty, while for others the magical number was fifty.[25] In addition, some roles, especially grandmotherhood, identified women as "aged" even though they might have only been in their forties. Agonizing about the chronological definition of "old age" reveals, in part, a familiarity with modern bureaucratic notions of old age as a number, namely sixty-five. This is an especially distressing point when the subject is female because modern bureaucratic ideas about the onset of old age, often associated with retirement, do not apply to women's experience in the past.

As demonstrated in the quest to define "old," it is clear that what is often missed in taking an absolute stance on either side of the debate is how the social and cultural interact to produce *meaning*. David Troyansky suggests that "attention to new kinds of sources that fall somewhere between the images of the cultural historians and the anonymous populations of the social historians" will improve our understanding of aging in the past.[26] There are few respected models that successfully combine the social and cultural. George Minois was severely criticized by his peers for his attempt, in *History of Old Age: From Antiquity to the Renaissance* (1987), to interpret the status of elderly

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[24]Achenbaum, 1.
[25] See Lynn Botelho, "Old Age and Menopause in rural women of early Modern Suffolk," *Women and Ageing in British Society since 1500*, Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane, eds., (Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), 51. This article discusses how menopause in women's fifties contributed to an aging appearance. Physical changes included the development of facial hair, a stoop, wrinkles, age spots, and the loss of teeth.
[26] Troyansky, 241.

persons based on a mixture of demographic evidence and cultural representations. In a similar way, Terri Premo is not successful in making the tension between cultural representations and the social "reality" of women's lives the central focus of her argument. Instead, Premo maintains the perspective of a social historian, viewing the feminine experience as one of continuity contingent on the maintenance of social relationships. What is needed in historical gerontology is a conceptual framework linking the social and cultural.

I propose that gender identity is one link, or lens, to understand how the social and cultural work together to create meaning in old age. As demonstrated in case studies and larger monographs, neither the social or cultural perspective has placed gender at the vanguard of analysis, although both often include it as an important sub-theme. Research from the perspective of gender identity is instructive because while it acknowledges old age to be a distinctive life stage it does not separate it from the ideology that influences individual behavior throughout the life course. Understanding the role of gender in the construction of meaning in old age, therefore, should involve a thoughtful mixing of the social and cultural. Specifically, the social "reality" of aging must be understood in the cultural context from which it derives. At the same time, cultural context does not exist in the absence of a social reality. This eclectic approach can help scholars better understand the past and also clarify the relationship between cultural representations and individual experience in contemporary society.

Integrating gender identity into the history of old age means reconsidering how the story has been constructed in the past. As indicated, studies of the aged during the

post-revolutionary period have effectively sheltered this segment of the population away from participation in other existing discourses in society. The organization of society based on gender, race, or class has traditionally been subsumed by a preoccupation with age. Persons entering the proverbial "last stage of life" somehow ceased being men or women, black or white, wealthy or poor, and simply became "old" and subjected only to the discourses appropriate for their age. Placing the ideology of old age at the center of discussion to the exclusion of other images mistakenly suggests that it was the prevailing social indicator. It wrongly assumes that society based respect entirely on age and that elderly persons attempted to live up to age-based behavioral norms before the demands of gender, race, or class. As a result of the assumption of their exclusion from participation in other ideologies, the aged have been marginalized and made even more invisible in the historical literature by virtue of their perceived separateness from the rest of society.[27] This ideological separation based on age grouping has also contributed to a limited understanding of the role elderly persons played in supporting and maintaining other existing social structures.

By analyzing the language used in tombstone inscriptions, death notices, funeral sermons, and memoirs, this thesis will review how cultural expectations placed on women, in general, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries impacted the reputation of aged women. Specifically, the next chapter will demonstrate how the ideology of domesticity contributed to the reputation of aged women as *women*. Chapter two will argue that before aged women were identified as "old," however it was defined,

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[27] See Margaret Clark and Barbara Gallatin Anderson, *Culture and Aging: An Anthropological Study of Older Americans*. Springfield: Charles C. Thomas 1967, p. 236. These authors argue that a system of values that withholds acknowledgment of elders as active members of society essentially results in

elderly women were identified as women. As women, they were esteemed as the mothers, wives, and moral guardians of a young nation. Chapter three will build on the theme of elderly women as women to explain how advanced age contributed to aged women's position as exemplars. Finally, chapter four will suggest the ideology of womanhood, when referring to the concept of beauty, did not apply to aged women's bodies. Instead, elderly women were defined as beautiful for the female virtues they continued to exhibit in old age.

Memorial literature does not reveal what the social "reality" of aged women's lives actually entailed but as cultural artifacts such documents can provide a fresh glimpse into what society, especially ministers who produced much of the memorial literature, expected their role to be. It is the "expectations," therefore, or cultural prescriptions placed on elderly women's lives that can be gleaned from memorial literature. Ultimately, what this thesis will illustrate is the concept of gender identity that was influential throughout the life course was magnified in importance during old age. Aged women were identified by the definition of true womanhood, as defined in early America, before they were recognized as members of an anonymous "elderly" population.

"denying them the right to be." The aged, in effect, share the same invisibility as other minority groups who are excluded from participating in what is considered mainstream society.

CHAPTER II

Nearly two hundred years ago, Mrs. Anstis Stewart's children paid for the following to be inscribed on her tombstone as a tribute to the memory of their mother. The limited space available on the stone meant the inscription had to be brief and the words carefully selected to represent the deceased in the best possible light. Inscribed for posterity, the following words reflect what was most important in the organization of a world now lost to us.

This humble stone is consecrated by filial affection
to the memory of Mrs. Anstis Stewart,
relict of Mr. Archibald Stewart of Providence, merchant.
She was born at Newport, Rhode Island, on the 13 of March, A.D. 1734, and
departed this life at Warwick, on the 7 of March, A.D. 1812,
in the consolatory Christian hope of a blessed immortality.

Her remains were deposited here with those marks of affection and respect,
justly due to the exemplary virtues she exhibited
through her variegated and protracted pilgrimage.
Blessed are the dead, who die in the Lord.[1]

With the exception of the date and place of her birth and death, her name, and the name of her husband, the tribute to the memory of seventy-eight year old Mrs. Anstis Stewart is disappointingly generalized and could have applied to any woman of her station. There is, however, historical value in generalizations. Imbedded within the inscription are what were perceived as three "justly due" sources of her esteem: namely, the fact that she was a Christian, the "exemplary virtues she exhibited," and her "protracted pilgrimage."

[1] Reverend Timothy Alden. *A Collection of American Epitaphs and Inscriptions with Occasional Notes*, vol. 4 (New York, 1814), 108.

While not explicit in its explanation of what “exemplar virtues,” “protracted pilgrimage,” or phrases like, “consolatory Christian hope of a blessed immortality” actually meant, a survey of other inscriptions from the early nineteenth century suggests that Mrs. Anstis Steward’s memorial was not unusual or negligently vague. Written in memory of a beloved mother and for the enlightenment of future generations, such words and phrases denote significance and deserve attention by historians.

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the significance and implications of the language of remembrance for elderly women during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The language suggests that aged women were identified as *women* before they were recognized as exemplar elders. As the preceding example demonstrates, Mrs. Anstis Steward was best remembered with “filial affection,” implying her success as a mother, as a “relict,” alluding to her success as a wife, and for the “exemplary virtues she exhibited,” suggesting her overall success as a woman. Mrs. Anstis Steward, however, was also remembered for being an exceptional woman throughout her “protracted pilgrimage.” This phrase alludes to the idea that gender and age worked together to bestow Mrs. Anstis Stewart, and others like her, a respected place in society. This chapter, therefore, will serve as the foundation for the following chapter. In chapter three, this paper will demonstrate how society used the reputation of elderly women as exemplary *women* to support and maintain existing ideas about gender difference.

The sources investigated include eighteenth and nineteenth century tombstone inscriptions, death notices, funeral sermons, and memoirs of women published after death. A majority of the evidence comes from New England, an area with a strong religious and publishing tradition at that time, but information from other geographical

areas is also included when appropriate. Certainly, sources such as diaries or letters could have been illustrative in defining how the ideology of age and gender worked together. For example, Terri Premo, in *Winter Friends*, successfully analyses numerous private letters and diaries to understand the influence of gender roles in the private lives of aging women.[2] Private documents, however, do not indicate the degree of integration age and gender shared in the public sphere. Documents associated only with the eloquent art of remembering the deceased are by nature refined for public consumption and written with the expressed intent of leaving an impression for posterity. Private documents do not possess the same qualities. In addition, unlike private documents that have the potential to reveal an author's personality, remembrance literature is formulaic in structure and generalized in tone.

Memorial literature is valuable as a historical source because by idealizing individuals it creates a public memory, a record, highlighting the values a culture cherishes at a specific point in time.[3] Tombstone inscriptions, death notices, funeral sermons, and memoirs do not necessarily represent an accurate account of individual characteristics but an account of what the culture that produced them valued. Historians can use the public memory to better understand late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century cultural thought about aged women and, more importantly, their place in society. As both public documents and a form of public memory, therefore, the language of remembrance can reveal through familiar words of respect the values most important in the organization of the new republic.

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[2] Terri Premo, *Winter Friends: Women Growing Old in the New Republic, 1785-1835* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990.
[3] For an interpretation of obituaries as a form of public memory see, Janice Hume, *Obituaries in American Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 12.

Elderly Women as *Women*

The language of remembrance indicates that during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries elderly women were esteemed as women before they were venerated as elders. In death, women of any age were best remembered for the "exemplary virtues" they exhibited in life. Respecting the deceased meant highlighting not what made the woman unique, such as living to an extraordinary age, but what made her the same as every other female of their social position.[4] Vivien Jones, in *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity*, explains that death notices were "experienced and articulated in terms of the established images and expectations of middle-class womanhood" so that individuals became "characters" in a "moral narrative constructed for public consumption."[5] To accurately understand where elderly women fit into the social structure of post-revolutionary America, therefore, the relative importance of gender identity as a significant source of meaning in society and individual lives should not be delegated to a subordinate position.

While women historians have largely neglected to include specific references to aged women, they have provided a foundation for understanding why the ideology of womanhood, though generalized and formulaic, had specific meaning and served a

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[4] It is important to note that the families of women from the middle and upper classes could better afford for their loved ones to be memorialized in remembrance literature. Studying artifacts produced by this select group, however, does not mean the ideology of womanhood was confined to upper class society. The pervasiveness of memorial literature suggests it served as a lofty "standard" of behavior for lower classes of women as well. Whether women outside the upper class were severely impacted by this standard can not be determined from the literature in this study. For a counterpoint to this theory, see Nancy A. Hewitt "Beyond the Search for Sisterhood: American Women's History in the 1980s" *Social History* 10 (October, 1985), 11. Hewitt argues that the concept of "womanhood" led not to the inclusion of women in a universal sisterhood but to a dichotomization of women along racial and class lines.

[5] Vivien Jones, *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity* (London: Routledge, 1990), 2.

significant purpose in the organization of post-revolutionary society. The most comprehensive work to discuss the implications of separate spheres for women in New England is Nancy Cott's *The Bonds of Womanhood*. In this work, Cott argues that gender identification was crucial to making sense of a world transformed by social, economic, and political change. According to Cott, the home was perceived as a moral refuge in a world seemingly growing more dangerous and sinful by the day. As guardians of the home, women represented all that was worthy in society. [6]

With no less than the moral integrity of the nation placed on the ability of women to be "good women," it should come as no surprise that gender specific virtues were espoused at their death. The authors of tombstone inscriptions and death notices consistently promoted the value of gender specific virtues before they made any special reference to an individual's age. A survey of tombstone inscriptions found in Reverend Timothy Alden's 1814 publication, *A Collection of American Epitaphs and Inscriptions*, reveals the most common "virtues" accorded aged women included piety, service to others, meekness, and what might generally be described as a halo of infectious goodness to which others were naturally attracted.[7] Tombstone inscriptions seldom provide elaborate descriptions of what aged women actually did to deserve respect but, in general, the aged, like all women, were religious, resigned Christian mothers and wives, and

[6] Nancy F. Cott *The Bonds of Womanhood: 'Woman's Sphere' in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 65. See Linda Kerber, "Separate Sphere, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History" *The Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988), 9-39 for a discussion of how the concept of separate spheres has been interpreted over the past forty years.
[7] Timothy Alden's four-volume *Collection* was intended to both preserve deteriorating monuments, primarily in New England and the Middle Colonies, and serve as a didactic piece of literature, instructing its readers in the accomplishments of illustrious members of society. Because Alden acted as a filter, carefully selecting entries for his work, this piece of early nineteenth-century literature best illustrates what values were cherished at that time. In addition to epitaphs, the *Collection* contains memoirs and inscriptions found on plates, medals, and swords. Scholars interested in researching how public memory was constructed in a variety of genres will find this source of immense value.

attentive to the ways of their household. In part, this finding supports the "four cardinal virtues" of True Womanhood cited in Barbara Welter's article, "The Cult of True Womanhood." Welter argues that during the nineteenth century women were best described in terms of their "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity."[8]

As suggested by the inscription for Mrs. Anstis Stewart, adult children often rewarded one specific domestic success, motherhood, by erecting with "filial affection" a tombstone dedicated to their aged mother's memory. Of course, motherhood was the esteemed occupation of all women, but "filial affection" was a special compliment reserved for aged women who had successfully, and with a little bit of luck, witnessed their children mature to adulthood. Sixty-six-year-old Martha Woofendale was remembered by her children as "one of the *best* of mothers."[9] It is not clear from tombstone inscriptions, however, if aged mothers were regarded as any more loving and nurturing than were young mothers. What scholars do know is that beginning in the late eighteenth century motherhood, especially its attendant responsibility to instill religious and moral values in children, was treated as the most important female occupation and, as such, it was a special honor to be remembered as a good mother.[10]

The momentous role of Republican mother was often extended to include even those women without children. Sixty-seven-year-old Abigail Ward, for example, was described as "childless" but was still credited on her tombstone as having served "this generation as a mother."[11] Without explicitly saying so, this inscription afforded Abigail Ward the same praise for piety and moral instruction bestowed on other Republican

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[8] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966), 152.
[9] Alden, *Collections*, vol. IV, 187.

mothers who actually had children. Terri Premo, in *Winter Friends*, also finds grandmotherhood provided aged women, who no longer had children at home, with the opportunity to extend their role as caregiver and moral mentor for a new generation.[12] Interestingly, memorial literature does not make specific references to women's role as grandmothers. Instead, the authors of tombstone inscriptions appear to have grouped the virtues of Republican motherhood and grandmother into the same category, thereby providing both old and younger women praise as "virtuous" mothers.

Among Barbara Welter's "cardinal virtues" for True Womanhood, only purity was not typically ascribed to elderly women on their tombstones. Welter argues that purity was "as essential as piety" to young women, and that in its absence women were "unfeminine" and thought of as "a member of some lower order."[13] While purity was not directly applied to them, aged women were important in upholding this societal expectation for chastity in younger members of society. Thomas Cole, in *The Journey of Life*, argues that elderly women were most easily entrusted with upholding morality in younger members of society because they had "proven their integrity" and were "beyond lust themselves."[14] New England ministers persistently argued that the aged were less passionate about the things of this world and more resigned as they contemplated the end of life.

Past the age of "passion," presumably aged women could speak from the position of authority in conduct manuals. Rarely, however, were they the primary targets of such

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[10] See Ruth Bloch, "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785-1815," *Feminist Studies* 4 (1978), 103-126.
[11] Alden, *Collections*, vol. I, 270.
[12] Premo, *Winter Friends*, 85.
[13] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 154.
[14] Thomas Cole, *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 53

literature. Vivien Jones, in *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity*, explains that behavioral manuals were preoccupied with "how women might create themselves as objects of male desire," a subject seemingly beyond the interest of aged women.[15] Terri Premo, in *Winter Friends*, recognizes the relationship between reduced passion and increased morality in aged women as an important factor in making them *superior* women and real models of behavior for younger members of their sex. In a survey of private documents, such as diaries and letters, Premo discovers aged women described as perfectly "feminine."[16]

The importance of purity was replaced on grave markers by a reemphasis on spirituality and the relative value of elderly women maintaining their faith to the end of life. When Anna Partridge died at the age of eighty-six her tombstone read, "In youth devoted to the Lord, Through a long life, esteem'd his word; Trusted in God, his laws obey'd, An thus an happy exit made."[17] The lesson was simple: a "long life" lived in accordance with God's will resulted in a peaceful conclusion. It was a lesson that could apply to old and young, men and women alike, as a funeral sermon for sixty-six year old Asenath Harrison suggested: "To be prepared to die, is the one great business of living."[18]

Advanced age and physical disability often made it easier for women to be praised for their piety. On her tombstone, seventy-eight year old Sarah Little was described as having "for a series of years…endured excruciating pain and much bodily indisposition; and, at last, calmly resign[ed] her body into the tomb in the well assured

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[15] Vivien Jones, ed., *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of femininity* (London: Routledge, 1990), 14.
[16] Terri Premo, *Winter Friends*, 109.
[17] Alden, *Collections*, vol. III, 99.
[18] Chauncy Lee, *A Sermon. Delivered at the Funeral of Mrs. Asenath Harrison, of Salisbury, Conn.* (Poughkeepsie 1816), 24.

hope of a resurrection to a blessed immortality."[19] As will be described in chapter three, long life and physical disability often contributed to women being esteemed as *exemplary* women, especially exemplary *Christian* women.

Not all feminine qualities were cited in each inscription and they did not need to be. The value of a formulaic language for public memory is that such references could be brief and the selected words still prove meaningful. References to piety, the performance of maternal and domestic duties, and characteristic humility recur often enough in memorial literature to make these gender specific qualities familiar rhetoric. The brevity of most tombstone inscriptions makes it difficult to determine if aged women were esteemed as especially proficient at any one aspect of womanhood. Attention to Christian resignation during times of protracted illness may suggest aged women were best skilled at both piety and submission, but young women who labored under the pains of illness might also be remembered for stoic behavior. What is clear is that aged women were best memorialized on tombstone inscriptions as virtuous *women*. Temperance Grant's eighty-two years of life could be easily, and respectfully, summarized on her tombstone as "an honour to her family and sex."[20] As part of the public memory, this was enough.

Death notices from the period were equally as formulaic and concise as tombstone inscriptions and reveal the same emphasis on qualities specific to one's gender. Seventy-year-old Ruth Potts's obituary in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* is representative of its kind. The notice reads, "If the tenderest performance of maternal duties, the most generous

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[19] Alden, *Collections*, vol. II, 108

[20] Alden, *Collections*, vol. III, 27.

exercise of benevolence and charity to her fellow creatures, and the purest of piety to her God, deserve to be lamented, then is the circle of her mourners numerous indeed."[21] There is little indication that Ruth Potts was bestowed any special praise for her long life. Instead, the language of respect in this memorial includes all the necessary characteristics for Barbara Welter's idea of an exceptional nineteenth-century woman: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Notice, however, that purity is placed in the context of spirituality, a relationship to God, and not a successful avoidance of the sins of the world. This death notice supports the idea, as suggested in tombstone inscriptions, that elderly women were extended supplemental praise for their piety. Increased religious authority also made aged women ideal instructors for morality in young females.

Pennsylvania Gazette obituaries often included accounts of the final illness leading to death. Elderly women's extraordinary piety supported the manner in which they conducted themselves in the final hours of life. Sixty-one-year-old Mrs. Elizabeth Holt, for example, "under the most painful and afflicting indisposition…exhibited a lively example of Christian fortitude and resignation."[22] In a similar fashion, Rebecca Treat "bore her late illness with Christian resignation, and when exhausted nature after a few struggles gave up the contest, she calmly sunk away and expired in the 76th year of her age."[23] It is significant to note that in most instances aged women seemingly bore their illnesses alone, a subtle reminder to other aged members of society that they were not to be a bother in old age.

While highlighting aged women's piety, *Pennsylvania Gazette* death notices were particularly articulate concerning elderly women's success in the domestic sphere. To

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[21] *The Pennsylvania Gazette*. 11 January 1786.
[22] *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, 12 March 1788.

carve out a respected place in the public newspaper, elderly women were nearly always first remembered as the dutiful wife of a more well-known merchant or minister. Obituaries, however, are equally as vague as tombstone inscriptions about what aged women actually did to deserve the accolades they received in public memory. Mrs. Elizabeth Bayton was simply "exemplary in all the relations and duties of domestic life," and Mrs. Rebecca Treat was "a good woman" who was also "exemplary in the discharge of all the private and relative duties."[24]

There is one notable difference between tombstone inscriptions and death notices. While tombstones might only be inscribed with "filial affection," death notices occasionally account for the number of children and grandchildren women actually produced. Sarah Cannon, who died at age eighty-nine, had "borne living issue, 17, 9 sons and 8 daughters, 15 grew to full age, healthy, lusty, and of fine spirits; and at her death had left 126 grand children, and 145 great grand children; in all, children, grand children and great grand children, to the amount of 288."[25] As community news, produced not for eternity but for a specific point in time, death notices could better afford to provide context for what it meant to be a "good woman."

Although *South Carolina Gazette* death notices are more abridged than those found in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, often only announcing a death in the community, when characterizations were made, the exaltation of gender specific virtues above the merits of age were no less prevalent in the South. Even before the nineteenth century, women in the South were remembered as caring mothers, dutiful wives, and kind friends

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[23] *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, 20 July 1785.
[24] *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, 20 August 1788; *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, 20 July 1785.
[25] *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, 9 June 1784.

who "delighted in Services to the Sick"[26] much like their Northern neighbors. An illustrative example of the value placed on continued service in domestic duties is found in the death notice of seventy-four-year-old Mrs. Mary Stewart, "who could see and do coarse work, and thread a Needle without Spectacles, within a fortnight of her Death."[27] While commenting on an instance of remarkable eyesight in old age may simply be attributed to an editor's attention to the unusual, the implication of this particular oddity is clear. Mary Stewart, even at the age of seventy-four, was praised for her ability to participate in the distinctly female task of sewing.[28] The aged Mary Stewart, therefore, was valued for her independence, not bothering anyone with the sewing she could still do herself. Independence was important in old age. Rarely did memorial literature discuss the aged's dependence on others, although dependence was probably more common.

In the South, a domination of gender specific virtues to the detriment of a valuation of age is especially compelling evidence to support the notion that elderly women, in all geographical areas, were valued as women before they were respected as elders. A survey of *South Carolina Gazette* obituaries suggests that Southerners had a greater incentive to flaunt evidence of long life in their communities because survivorship was better in the North. Interestingly, survivorship appears to be a point of conflict between the regions beginning as early as the 1740s. Southerners were particularly offended by the negative image their "Northern Neighbours" held against them as a disease-ridden country, as if "we were a Colony of Youths and that Grey-Hairs would not

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[26] A. S. Salley and Mabel Webber, eds. *Death Notices in The South-Carolina Gazette 1732-1775* (Columbia: South Carolina, 1954), 22.
[27] Salley and Webber, *Death Notices in The South-Carolina Gazette*, 25.
[28] See Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*: *The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1980), 18-23, for a discussion of spinning, weaving, and sewing as distinctly female occupations. Norton also suggests that women in old age would often rely on these tasks as a means of financial support, 16.

flourish in this climate" one notice claims.[29] Southerners were convinced that "people can live to a good old age [in the South] as well as any where else" and, like a modern-day retirement brochure, often promoted the warm climate as beneficial to the comfort of aged persons.[30]

Although Southerners had the incentive to do so, once again, memorial literature indicates that age was not praised above gender specific characteristics. Like the cursory descriptions found on tombstone inscriptions, the long lives of women could be easily summarized in Southern obituaries into just a few words. It was enough to simply indicate that in life an individual had been a "worthy good woman"; rarely did any more need to be said.[31]

Funeral sermons and memoirs published in memory of individuals provide a different type of memorial record from tombstone inscriptions and death notices. In New England, such records were part of a large body of didactic literature intent on instructing the community on how to achieve Heaven by being good Christians. The emphasis on Christianity often overwhelmed specific references to qualities associated with men or women. The intention of didactic literature was not to praise the individual but to use the life as an example of commendable piety. An example of this point is found in a funeral sermon for sixty-six-year-old Mrs. Asenath Harrison. Pastor Chauncey Lee of the Congregational Church in Colebrook, Connecticut, wrote, "In these declarations, it is not my object to eulogize the dead. Of what avail could this be to one who has forever

[29] Sally and Webber, *Death Notices in The South-Carolina Gazette*, 20.
[30] Ibid, 30.
[31] Ibid.,30.

quitted these shores of mortality…less still, is it my design to soothe and flatter feelings of vanity and ostenation in surviving friends: God forbid: but to benefit the living that your precious souls, my hearers, may derive spiritual and saving instruction, and God's great name be glorified."[32] Ministers did not intend to make individuals saints, but to simply promote their lives as worthy examples of Christian piety.

In a study of New England funeral sermons published between 1672-1792, Lonna Myers Malmsheimer finds honoring the dead created a unique dilemma for seventeenth-century pastors who wanted to kindly remember the deceased but not to create the image of a saint for risk of falling into "popish idolatry." Malmsheimer argues funeral sermons were basically subgenera of sermons and, as such, they maintained the sermon's instructional emphasis until the mid-eighteenth century when the eulogy, the only modification to the sermon form, began to compose more of its content. Even when the eulogy began to dominate, however, the purpose of funeral sermons was not to esteem the individual but to honor their lives as examples of Christianity and use their reputation for didactic purposes.[33]

Of course, men could be distinguished in the public memory as dedicated Christians, and indeed they were. Malmsheimer discovered seventy percent of funeral sermons printed between 1672-1792 were for men while only twenty-five percent were published for women, the other five percent found children recognized as ideals.[34] Death notices and tombstone inscriptions support Malmsheimer's findings; men were praised for living a Christian life in these documents as often as women were. Margaret Masson,

[32] Pastor Chauncey Lee, *A sermon delivered at the funeral of Mrs. Asenath Harrison*, 15. A quote from this document, "to be prepared to die, is the one great business of living, " was introduced earlier in the paper to indicate the degree of emphasis placed on piety on tombstone inscriptions.

in "The Typology of the Female as a Model for the Regenerate: Puritan Preaching, 1690-1730," explains that to separate the church congregation along strict gender lines would have created an ideological quandary. In relationship to God, both men and women were "brides" of Heaven and were equally expected to be submissive to His will.[35]

The union of feminine virtues and Christian values, however, was not an unusual pairing during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Women, as the moral guardians of the home and by extension society, were most easily associated with Christian values. Nancy Cott argues in *The Bonds of Womanhood* that during the mid-seventeenth century, when women outnumbered men in New England churches, religion was increasingly viewed as a matter of the heart, not the head. The necessities of Christianity, including resignation, meekness, and humility, were more closely associated with women's "natural" tendencies than men, whose hearts were viewed as more resistant to submitting to the will of God.[36]

Advanced age, as illustrated in tombstone inscriptions and death notices, gave elderly women, as *women*, the authority to act as moral exemplars in the public memory. Joshua Huntington's *Memoirs of The Life of Mrs. Abigail Waters* was primarily a religious biography meant to inspire and educate Christians and lead nonbelievers to the saving knowledge of Christ. While the narrative was presumably based on her life and the recollections of her pastor, Abigail Waters played the lead character in what amounted to a religious melodrama documenting her struggles against sin and highlighting the blessings of God in her life. This saga began early, with her religious

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[33] Lonna Myers Malmsheimer, "New England Funeral Sermons and Changing Attitudes toward Woman, 1672-1792" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1973), 16-17, 25.
[34] Ibid., 32.

conversion as a young girl, and ended when she was confined to bed and questioning her "usefulness" to family and friends. The final portion, the very point when a frail Abigail began to doubt her contributions, is the most compelling section of the memoir because it is here that Pastor Huntington transformed Abigail into an exemplar Christian. Under the most excruciating pain, the result of multiple strokes during the winter of 1814, Abigail resigned herself to be content with the will of God in her life and accepted pain as a necessary precondition to the glories she expected to receive in Heaven. To bear pain and suffering and not complain was the sign of a faithful Christian, especially a devoted aged Christian. As the funeral sermon of Rachel Smith indicates, "the passive virtues of meekness, humility, patience, forbearance and forgiveness, are needful to form the Christian character, and are manifested by trials and tempations."[37] The "passive virtues" of Christianity also made Abigail Waters an exemplary woman.

A second example of religious biography includes the *Memoir of Mrs. Martha Barnes*, written and published in 1834 by John Cookson, Pastor of the First Baptist Church in Middletown, Connecticut. Similar to that of Abigail Waters, this memoir tells the story of ninety-six-year-old Martha Barnes' spiritual journey though life. While not debilitated by illness in her old age, Barnes accepted Christ early in life and found His blessings bestowed on her through every period of life. The spiritual road to being heralded as an exemplar Christian was not always an easy one, but, as the previous example has demonstrated, such trials and tribulations were the educational value of such stories. Barnes encountered strife from her husband who refused to allow her to practice

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[35] Margaret W. Masson, "The Typology of the Female as a Model for the Regenerate: Puritan Preaching, 1690-1730," *Signs* (Winter 1976), 305.
[36] Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, 127-128.
[37] Henry Lincoln, *A sermon delivered....at the interment of Mrs. Rachel Smith* (Boston 1806), 5.

her faith. At one point, as the story indicates, he even threatened her with death if she attended the Baptist church. In widowhood Martha Barnes faced poverty but always looked and trusted in God to see her through. The last trial, of course, was death itself. Martha Barnes, like other women, faced it with the Christian resignation she had known all her life.[38]

The emphasis in religious biographies was always on demonstrating women's lives as examples of a Christian life well spent, but the memoirs also depict aged women as exemplar *women* as well as good Christians. In "mentioning a few prominent traits" of Martha Barnes, the Pastor Cookson remarks on her "warmth" and lack of passion for the affairs of the world. In keeping with the value placed on women as the disinterested guardians of moral authority in the home, Martha Barnes was admirably "indifferent to [worldly] money, and its power."[39]

During funeral sermons, but especially in eulogies, pastors praised elderly women for displaying the virtues of true womanhood. Mrs. Lydia Potwine, a minister's wife, was remembered as "a wise, prudent, humble, obedient, modest, but faithful counsellor" to her husband. In addition, Potwine was esteemed for being a kind "mother-in-law to the children of her husband by a former wife, and as a mother to her own children."[40] Women, in general, were praised for their service to others, their charity to the poor, and as eminently "useful" in the ways of their household.

In sum, tombstone inscriptions, deah notices, funeral sermons, and memoirs all recognized the importance of gender in the organization of post-revolutionary society.

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[38] John Cookson, *Memoir of Mrs. Martha Barnes* (Middletown: Edwin Hunt, 1834) 7-48.
[39] Ibid., 43.

Aged women were regarded as *women* before they were esteemed as elders. In the absence of references to a "protracted pilgrimage," "long life," or "journey through life," there is absolutely no indication that age was deemed more valuable as a source of praise than the virtues associated with womanhood. Indeed, as the next chapter will demonstrate, age only enhanced elderly women's position in society as women; it did not offer a radically new identity for them in the public memory.

This finding may initially seem to be a simplistic observation. Elderly women, after all, *were* women. Why should they be excluded from contemporary discourses relevant to their sex? Simply stated, elderly women were *not* excluded from being associated with the positive characteristics related to their sex. In general, it is modern-day scholars who have not recognized aged men and women as participating members of their gender, or even race or class, but have grouped individuals together in an anonymous "elderly" population. The absence of aged women from the historiography of old age and women's history reflects more about our own culture's preoccupation with youth, especially as it applies to women, than was actually representative during the past. Based on the language of memorial literature, therefore, it no longer seems appropriate to label late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century women as "old" until we have first understood their lives as *women*.

While scholars have not adequately explained why the characteristics associated with true womanhood were a more potent source of esteem than age, they have implied why the characteristics associated with old age were not commonly cited in the context of memorial literature. First, old age was commonly associated with negative images of physical and mental decline. Paula Scott, in *Growing Old in the Early Republic*, suggests

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[40] Shubael Bartlett, *A sermon preached... at the funeral of Mrs. Lydia Potwine* (Hartford 1818), 16.

religious writers argued physical decline necessitated individuals withdrawal from the world and concentrate on their spiritual well-being and the afterlife. In contrast, medical writers focused on infirmity in order to offer their advice in how to "cure" the ill effects of old age; they advocated exercise and a positive mental outlook as common "treatments." Fictional sources too often identified the elderly in a predominately negative fashion, often describing the aged in terms of visible signs of physical decline; slumping shoulders, grey hair, loss of teeth, and wrinkles were among the most common signs of old age.[41]

The image of old age hardly offered a positive source of expression, so it is not surprising that family and friends, ministers, and newspaper editors failed to mention it as a source of pride when writing memorial literature. In addition, with the image of old age deriving from disparate sources, often with multiple meanings and various motivations, there was no dominant ideology of old age. Intricacy did not suit the needs of memorial literature. Memorial literature was designed, in part, to instruct others how to live based on a display of exemplary qualities and it required a readily identifiable mode of living. The ideology of old age was simply too complex and the image too negative to provide a reliable model for living that could be applied to a broad population.

In contrast to the complexities of old age, the ideology associated with gender difference provided a much more stable and positive avenue of expression for the authors of memorial literature. Women did not cease being representatives of their sex when they entered the proverbial last stage of life. As the next chapter will demonstrate, elderly women were respected as exemplars of their sex, not representatives of a vague

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[41] Paula Scott, *Growing Old in the Early Republic: Spiritual, Social, and Economic Issues, 1790-1830* New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997), 22-30.

notion of what being "old" meant. In addition, the notion of gender difference and separate spheres qualified as a more persuasive, familiar, and persistent mode of living for others than old age ever could have. Specifically, the superior qualities associated with being "worthy women" for a long period of time could be applied to instruct a younger generation of women.

Advocating that elderly women were women before they were identified as elders does not represent a significant setback for historians of old age. As the next chapter will indicate, age did matter in the *way* aged women were remembered. In fact, in some instances physical decline, the familiar negative consequence of living a long life, was a significant source of their exemplar status. What this new approach to understanding aged women's place in society suggests, however, is an exciting alternative way of looking at the history of old age. Integrating gender identity allows scholars to investigate how the aged population was a part of, not separate from, the rest of society.

The next chapter will broaden the theme of elderly women as *women* to understand exactly where aged women stood in relationship to others of their sex.

CHAPTER III

The notion that elderly women during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were respected as women before they were venerated as elders may initially seem to imply that age contributed little to the organization of society itself. This is not the case. Indeed, memorial literature indicates there is more to the story of elderly women in early America than can be captured by simply making them "worthy good women" who, in the public's mind, just happened to live a little longer than the rest of the population. The ideology of womanhood and age did not exist independently but worked in conjunction with each other to provide women of advanced age a well-integrated and highly valued place in post-revolutionary society.

This chapter will expand on the theme of elderly women as women by exploring how age influenced their position in society. Were aged women reserved a special place in society based exclusively on the number of years they lived? To answer this question, this chapter takes a closer look at the language of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century tombstone inscriptions, death notices, funeral sermons, and memoirs. The words of these memorials demonstrate that age not only afforded elderly women a revered place in society as exemplars, but also granted them a specific role to play in maintaining the very ideology of domesticity that would encapsulate their lives after death. Evidence for this assertion is found in subtle references to the length of a woman's life and perceptions of her death. This portion of the study, therefore, begins to extract aged women from the prevailing notions of womanhood by reexamining how society memorialized them as *elderly* women in the public memory.

Elderly Women as *Exemplars*

Contemporary society tends to understand and define length of life in numerical terms only. Unlike today, post-revolutionary society did not bureaucratize old age to include only persons sixty-five years of age and older.[1] Length of life, however, does appear to have been a significant source of recognition. David Hackett Fischer, in *Growing Old in America*, first recognized that the Puritans did not simply esteem old age, they "venerated," or held persons who had achieved a long life in awe, as having received a sign of God's favor.[2] While Fischer suggests old age was devalued after the American Revolution, the result of a new republican emphasis on equality, the term "venerable" continued to be used in the context of tombstone inscriptions, death notices, funeral sermons, and memoirs, to signify those men and women who had lived a long life. There is no evidence in public memorial literature to support the idea that elderly persons during the post-revolutionary period were "venerated" as gods or were thought to possess supernatural powers, as Fischer argued was true during the seventeenth century. Women, as well as men, who lived to a "venerable" age, however, were described as godly and models of Christian behavior worthy of imitation.

A subtle shift in the meaning of venerable can be detected in late eighteenth-century memorial literature to support the transition of elderly persons described as saints to elderly persons simply being praised as godly individuals. During the seventeenth century, persons of advanced ages were considered members of God's "elect," their long

[1] See Carole Haber, *Beyond Sixty-Five: The Dilemma of Old Age in America's Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), for a discussion of how old age evolved to be associated with a numerical designation, namely 65.
[2] David Hackett Fischer, *Growing Old in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 33.

lives on earth viewed as a sign God favored them for eternity in Heaven.[3] During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, it was not God's favor upon men and women that made advanced age special, but the favorable relationship to God that handled over many decades made the elderly exemplary Christians. The direction of religious affection had changed. It was no longer God who chose, or "elected," aged saints but people who made decisions that would prove advantageous to long life. A "venerable" age signified elderly persons who had lived godly lives, many times accepting God in youth and always praising His name over the course of their long life. A shift in the meaning of veneration, from indicating the status of God to simply signifying godly individuals, made aged persons better able to serve as realistic models of Christian behavior. If not all individuals could reach old age, everyone was at least expected to aspire to godly behavior.

While veneration was a term of respect for both aged men and women, the kind of praise bestowed on each was often gender specific. As chapter two demonstrates, aged women were esteemed for the virtues particularly associated with women, namely piety and the performance of services as mother and wife. Age, however, did contribute to the *degree* of adulation afforded elderly women. In memorial literature, women who lived beyond sixty were nearly always given special media attention for being "virtuous" women for a period beyond the expected life span.[4] This attention to length of life in memorial literature is best illustrated in subtle differences between the terminology of respect accorded young and old women.

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[3] Ibid., 33.

[4] Defining "old" has been a topic of some debate among historical gerontologists. For the purposes of this study, memorial literature seems to indicate that the elderly population was largely understood as those 60

Elderly widows were nearly always given recognition as "relicts" of their husband. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, in *Good Wives*, suggests that all women were made relicts at the time of their husband's death.[5] While widows could be young or old, a survey of memorial literature indicates the term s "widow" and "relict" were not always synonymous. A young woman, usually below the age of sixty, whose husband had died, were simply memorialized a widow. Indeed, old and young women alike could be described as "widows," even "consorts" or "wives," if their husbands were still alive, but only age brought the elevated recognition associated with being a relict. In addition, the literature indicates that relicts, like most women in old age, did not remarry.[6] Instead, a protracted length of life spent in widowhood made women relicts by making them living memorials of respect to their husbands.[7]

The way in which the term relict was used in tombstone inscriptions and death notices to signify the widow of a respected member of society might initially seem to imply it was only a titular term of esteem, much like "veneration," only specific to aged women. Relict, however, was not necessarily a passive term. Such women actively participated in perpetuating their husband's memory and keeping the causes he cherished

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years of age and older. It was at this age that references to an individual's "venerable" age, "protracted pilgrimage," "long life," or "journey through life," were most common.

[5] Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England 1650-1750* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 7.

[6] See Joan R. Gundersen, *To Be Useful to the World: Women in Revolutionary America* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 46. In general, Gunderson argues women remarried half as often as men because there were fewer single men available, relative to widows, and because widows preferred the economic advantages inherent in remaining under feme sole status. While no comprehensive studies have documented the prevalence of remarriage for aged widows, Terri Premo, in *Winter Friends,* finds there was a stigma attached to what were called "May-December" marriages; unions between older women and younger men. The implication was that old women were beyond the age of passion and could no longer be expected to bring joy to a husband in marriage, 112.

[7] Memorial literature does not indicate the same language of respect accorded widowers. Men were never relicts of their deceased wives. Such evidence does not indicate a disregard for aged men, instead it demonstrates the continuing influence of gender roles into old age. Aged men, more often, were respected

alive, as was demonstrated in a passage from Mrs. Phebe Phillips' funeral sermon. The sermon read, "The spirit of her ascended partner, still actuating his relict on earth, at a recent period she contributed largely to the foundation of the Theological institution; and thus, with other generous donors, extended the great plan, which his prolifick, active mind had projected, and in part executed."[8] Scholars who have studied aged women's private correspondence have also found relicts continuing to keep their husband's memory alive during this period when the public was especially receptive to displays of sentimental pride for the revolutionary generation. For example, Terri Premo, in *Winter Friends*, suggests that Deborah Logan of Philadelphia wrote the reminiscences of her husband entitled *Memoir of Dr. George Logan of Stenton*.[9]

In addition to relict, "mother in Israel" also connoted a woman of advanced age. While "relict" was a secular term of respect, "mother in Israel" referred to the special value placed on aged matriarchs of the church. This term, then, supports the notion proposed in the preceding chapter that aged women were given supplementary respect for their piety. As were other honorary titles, "mother in Israel" derived from the most influential literary source in early America, the Bible. The phrase was first used to describe Deborah, a prophetess leader and counselor of Israel. In *The Song of Deborah*, found in the fifth chapter of Judges, verse 7, Deborah "arose a mother in Israel" to guide the Israelites in a successful military campaign against their oppressors. Of course, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries mother(s) in Israel did not need

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in memorial literature for holding public office. Aged women, even in extended periods of widowhood, would continue to be granted social identity through their husbands.

[8] Reverend Timothy Alden. *A Collection of American Epitaphs and Inscriptions with Occasional Notes*, vol. II (New York, 1814), 41.

[9] Premo, *Winter Friends*, 35. Also see Terri Premo, "'Like A Being Who Does Not Belong:' The Old Age of Deborah Norris Logan," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 57 (January 1983), 85-112.

to participate in a real battle to earn their position as exemplary Christians. Metaphorically, mother(s) in Israel waged a lengthy internal battle against sin and ultimately, as funeral sermons and memoirs indicate, proved victorious. Essentially, therefore, "mother in Israel" signified aged women who led others to Christ by living a virtuous life and exalting God among both her family and her church family. Indeed, young women could be virtuous, but they simply had not lived long enough to qualify as model Christians. Like relicts, only time bestowed on a woman the honor of being called a "mother in Israel."[10]

Rarely displayed in death notices or tombstone inscriptions, "mother in Israel" was primarily used in the context of memoirs and funeral sermons. The phrase often served to foreshadow a description of what activities aged women engaged in to earn such a revered place in the church. Like relicts, "mother(s) in Israel," it seems, were not passive. Their exemplary lives included the evangelical role of praying for the spiritual atonement of members of the church, regularly attending church, educating others about God, and finally resigning themselves to His will in the final hours of life.[11] "Mother(s) in Israel" had much to teach others by their Christian piety. Lamenting the fact that ninety-two-year-old Mary Smith had not left a diary, the orator at her funeral announced, "those who best know the history of this mother in Israel, feel an equal regret; for, no doubt, if she had improved, in this way, the opportunities, which her long pilgrimage offered, her productions would have been interesting and…useful.[12] The association between a "long pilgrimage" and a woman's exemplar status within the church is clear

[10] Alden, *Collections* vol. I, 95.
[11] Shubael Barlett, *A Sermon Preached on Lord's Day at the Funeral of Mrs Lydia Potwine* (Hartford 1818), 15-16
[12] Alden, *Collections*, vol. I, 84.

from this example; only "mother(s) in Israel" had lived long enough to provide authoritative and "useful" instruction to others based on their real-life experiences.

Memorial literature clearly recognized the numerical significance of age by bestowing upon the elderly generic titles, such as "venerable," and other gender specific ones, such as "relict" and "mother in Israel" to women. Length of life, however, was not deemed valuable in years alone: the *kind* of life was important as well. A good example of this idea comes from an epitaph in Reverend Alden's collection of memorials. The inscription read, "Honourable age is not that which standeth in length of time, nor that is measured by number of years. An unspotted life is old age."[13] Young women, therefore, could theoretically be old by simply living a virtuous life, no matter how short the duration. While there are many examples of young women living "a short but well-spent life"[14] and being held up as models of behavior for their children, rarely did the authors of memorial literature make such women exemplars for society as a whole. It was the advantage of time and experience that presumably made elderly women more qualified than younger women to be models of decorum. The language of experience in memorial literature includes frequent, yet often subtle, references to an individual's "protracted pilgrimage," "long life," and "journey through life." Of course, such terms could never be applied to describe young women's experience; young women had only begun the journey.

In the context of memorial literature it was often aged women's achieved role as exemplary *Christian* women that made them ideal models of behavior for society as a whole. The importance of experience, in this case a remarkable Christian journey, is

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[13] Alden, *Collections*, vol. II, 156.
[14] Alden, *Collections*, vol. IV, 205.

amply demonstrated by ninety-three-year-old Mary Weld's tombstone inscription that read, "Passenger, aspire not to her age, but to imitate her life, which was a real ornament to the Christian profession."[15] Leaving behind a life worthy of imitation required living a life that would leave an impeccable reputation for others *to* follow. Appropriately, then, the theme of eighty-eight-year-old Jerusha Lathrop's funeral was the value of a "good name." The title of the sermon came from a verse in the Bible that reads, "A good name is better than precious ointment," and championed the worth of a good name, not in achieving worldly fame, but in gaining the rewards of Heaven. According to her pastor, Jerusha Lathrop had not vainly sought a "good name" to obtain worldly success and distinction among her friends. Instead, Lathrop maintained a "good name" throughout her long life and set a "good example" for others by keeping an "amiable disposition" open to the will of God, bestowing charity to her neighbors, and conversing in a manner that was "dignified and moral" and never concerned with to trifles.[16] In much the same way as Jerusha Lathrop, when the ninety-two-year-old "mother in Israel" Mary Smith died the pastor at her funeral inquired, "'Do we desire to close our pilgrimage as happily, and to leave as precious a remembrance behind us?' We must then pursue the same course. We must be as humble, as watchful, as prayerful, as she was. We must let the light of our example shine before men. We must live for eternity, *not* for time."[17] Reputation, then, was especially pronounced in memorial literature as an aged woman's outstanding "good name" was used to sanction and inspire proper Christian behavior in others.

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[15] Alden, *Collections,* vol. I, 123.
[16] Joseph Strong, *A Sermon, Delivered at the Funeral of Mrs. Jerusha Lathrop* (Norwich 1805), 5, 8, 10.
[17] Alden, *Collections*, vol. I, 93.

The last phrase from Mary Smith's funeral sermon, "we must live for eternity, not for time," indicates that the *kind* of life one led, or a good reputation, was in many ways more important than length of life. Young women could just as easily have "lived for eternity" by being as "humble," "watchful," and "prayerful" as Mary Smith, and certainly young women were expected to do so. The difference was that aged women had much more time to improve upon the kind of life they led and to embellish the reputation they would leave behind in the public memory. Christian behavior could grant women of any age a "good name" and passage into Heaven, but, just as time would transform aged women into "mother(s) in Israel," only time would transform aged women into angels on earth and make their reputations worthy as an example for others to follow. For example, Sarah Toppan, who died at age ninety-six a "relict" of Doctor Edmund Toppan, was praised on her tombstone for "having uniformly adorned her early profession of the gospel" for "a long time."[18] The phrase "long time" did not carve out a radically new position for Sarah Toppan, but it did serve to enhance her value as an exemplary Christian woman within the community.

A long life, a numerical old age, also gave elderly women the advantage of time to perfect their role as *women,* a role the previous chapter reveals could contribute to greater social prestige. As women of advanced years, this segment of the population had exemplified the virtues respected in women longer, and if we choose to believe the authors of memorial literature, better than anyone else in society did. Elderly women were "worthy women," but they were also *exemplar* women. Indeed, they too left behind a reputation worthy of imitation. When Mary Cranch died in 1811, at the age of seventy, Reverend Peter Whitney reflected at her funeral that "few of her sex have surpassed her

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[18] Alden, *Collections*, vol. II, 66.

in useful qualifications" and none in "virtues." Mary was remembered as a "cheerful" companion, an "affectionate" friend, and "in the relation of a wife and mother, she was *every thing* that could be desired."[19]

While aged Christian women could serve as models of behavior for society as a whole, elderly women's exemplar status as *women* gave them a more specific role to play as instructors of a younger generation of women. The specific role aged women played in memorial literature as exemplar models of decorum for younger women is especially evident in the following passage from eighty -one-year-old Mary Cleaveland's funeral sermon. "Let it be remembered, that the example of the deceased, speaks loudly, not to the aged only, but to the middle aged and young; *especially* to females. Female excellence should excite female attention. Would you be respectable? Then be as this aged woman deceased has been through life."[20] The pastor goes on to explain that Mary Cleaveland was an exemplary woman because she was "inoffensive, affectionate, and merciful," "thought to possess the harmlessness of the dove," and was a "benevolent" friend to her neighbors.[21] In more direct terms, Mary Cleaveland was the perfect woman because she knew her place, remained quiet, and did not bother an yone other than to provide assistance. In an era when younger generations of women were beginning to receive education and find new avenues of expression beyond the home, this was a powerful, yet subtle, reminder of their proper and more discrete place in society.

The reputation of elderly women as superior women, especially exemplary *Christian* women, was easily supported by the impression that persons of advanced age

[19] Alden, *Collections*, vol. III, 12.
[20] Asahel Huntington, *An Address…at the Interment of Mrs. Mary Cleaveland* (Newburyport 1810), 9-10.

had inevitably experienced their share of trials and tribulations. This idea was introduced in chapter two to illustrate the notion that elderly women were bestowed supplemental praise for their piety in the face of illness and disability at the end of life. A passage from seventy-four-year-old Mrs. Rachel Smith's funeral confirms the importance of keeping the faith even in times of uncertainty. According to pastor Henry Lincoln, Rachel Smith "constitute(d) the good name of a humble Christian" because "in every relation" she was "faithful," "in every condition" she was "contented," "under every trial" she remained "unshaken," and "under every evil" she was "patient and resigned, in the full belief that God ordains, and that Christ has promised his grace to pardon, to assist, to comfort and reward for his own sake."[22] In the context of Rachel Smith, "faithfulness," "contentment," "patience," and "resignation" were not so much character traits but the products of a successful life journey in alliance with true faith.

According to the authors of memorial literature, illness created the neces sity to confirm and display true faith. "Toward the close of life," eighty-three-year-old Hannah Coe "laboured under many bodily infirmities; under which she bowed submissive to the will of God. Eventually, she was confined to her bed under languishing illness, and appeared obviously sinking into the grave. In the view of her approaching dissolution, her faith remained firm and unshaken in the mercy of God."[23] In a like manner, seventy-eight-year-old, Sarah Little "for a series of years, endured excruciating pain and much bodily indisposition; and, at last, calmly resigned her body into the tomb in the well assured hope of a resurrection to a blessed immortality."[24] At sixty-five-year-old Mrs.

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[21] Ibid., 10.
[22] Henry Lincoln, *A Sermon…at the Interment of Mrs. Rachel Smith* (Boston 1806), 6.
[23] Alden, *Collections*, vol. IV, 209.
[24] Alden, *Collections*, vol. II, 108.

Ann Warren's funeral, Pastor Thomas Skelton exclaimed, "with what sweet composure of mind, with what patience, with what resignation, did she endure her last short but distressing illness!"[25] It was not merely the presence of disease, therefore, but the characteristic resignation and patience with which elderly women handled their unfortunate circumstances that made them exemplary Christians.[26]

As the previous chapter illustrates, the authors of both the *Memoir of Martha Barnes* and the *Memoir of Abigail Waters* also successfully used the role of trial and tribulation in making their heroines exemplar *Christian* women. Throughout the course of their long lives, both Martha Barnes and Abigail Waters were confronted with events that would test their faith in God. Martha Barnes, who lived to be ninety-six years old, faced a husband who refused to allow her to freely practice her faith. In widowhood, Barnes encountered poverty, yet God, as the memoir suggests, always provided all she and her children needed and the means to submit tithes to the church. Under the subtitle, "Help in time of need," the memoir tells the story of how a "destitute" Martha Barnes put all her faith in God to literally show her the proper path. The parable explains;

> **"At one time not having employment, and being destitute of some of the necessaries of life, she left her house, believing that God would provide the means whereby her wants and those of her children should be supplied. Coming to the corner of a certain street, she was at a loss which course to take. She then set up her walking stick, and resolved, that let it fall which way it might, that way she would go. In that direction she had not proceeded far when she met an individual who said, 'Mrs. Barnes, you are just the person I want to see; my wife wants a rug weaved, if you will take the pay in provisions.'"[27]**

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[25] Thomas Skelton, *A Sermon…occasioned by the death of Mrs. Ann Warren* (Dedham 1816), 15.

[26] It is important to note that the young could also suffer trials, but because illness was more often associated with old age elderly women's continued reliance on God and their unfailing obedience to His will in the final days of their long life was made more meaningful. In the context of memorial literature, aged women's "good name" as "humble Christian(s)" could provide a powerful source of instruction for others who perhaps had yet to experience the particular trails associated with physical disability.

While the story alludes to Barnes making a literal change in direction, it also confirms a change in her spiritual direction as well during this time of crisis. The story concludes with Barnes tearfully reflecting on the incident l ater in life and exclaiming, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped me."[28]

The implication of the story, or the lesson for readers, is twofold. On the surface, it demonstrates that during difficult times, Martha Barnes put her faith in God to direct her way and that it was a course she would willingly follow throughout her ninety -six years of life. Once Barnes confirmed her total faith in God, however, it provided the basis for other stories proving to readers that God was consistently responsive to her needs. Essentially, the lesson to readers was that if they too put their faith in God to show them the way during times of trial, He would also be faithful to their needs. It is significant that the latter lesson was the more important one to be gained by making aged women exemplary Christians in didactic literature. While young women could demonstrate faith in God during times of testing, aged Christian women could provide many more stories to prove God's faithfulness throughout the course of their long life. In addition, Martha Barnes, like other aged women, had inevitably suffered from the economic pains of widowhood, yet because of her decision to follow God's path she could testify to a long life free of uncertainty. Her advanced age at the time of death made Barnes an authority on the subject of strong faith during times of testing.

In the same way Martha Barnes' faith was tested during economic crisis, the story of ninety-six-year-old Abigail Waters also demonstrates the ability of aged women to exhibit their faith during times of trial. In Abigail Waters' case, however, the spiritual

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[27]John Cookson, *Memoir of Mrs. Martha Barnes* (Middletown 1834), 33.
[28] Ibid., 33.

test was associated with illness. Waters suffered several strokes near the end of her life that left her confined to bed and reliant on others for physical support. According to her pastor, Waters, like Barnes, continued to put her confidence in God for spiritual support. Abigail Waters expresses this sentiment in the *Memoirs of the life of Mrs. Abigail Waters* by affirming, "I have great pains, but I have great supports too. Though the hand of the Lord is upon me, the everlasting arm is underneath me. I have so many mercies mingled with my trials, that they can hardly be called trials."[29] In her feeble state, Waters was described as constantly in the midst of prayer. "O! What a privilege to have a throne of grace to go to…One who knows by experience the infirmities of our nature; and has a fellow-feeling for his people in all their distresses. What an encouragement, what a comfort is this!"[30]

The encouragement Abigail Waters found in faith was meant to encourage readers also to seek security in God. Similar to Barnes, Waters' age helped to make her a prime example of the benefits of continued faith over time. The significance of age in placing Waters in a position of authority in the *Memoir* was especially evident in the messages she directed to young members of her church and family. "Tell the dear young people to seek an interest in Christ. I sought him in the morning of life, and have ever found him a faithful God."[31] In a second passage Waters' pleas with her pastor to "Tell the dear youth to seek God betimes: tell them there is no enjoyment to be compared with that which results from his favor: and tell them of the peculiar encouragements which there are, to an early surrender of themselves to him."[32] Such statements, taken in the context of an

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[29] Joshua Huntington, *Memoirs of the life of Mrs. Abigail Waters* (Boston 1817), 91.
[30] Ibid., 105.
[31] Ibid., 120.
[32] Ibid., 119.

aged woman who was obviously suffering from great physical pain in the final days of her life, were intended to inspire others, and especially young people, to seek the comforts of faith.

In both the Martha Barnes and Abigail Waters cases, the association between old age and trial, especially infirmity, reveals evidence of what might only be described as a second conversion experience. Of course, the first conversion experience occurred in youth when both Barnes and Waters were confronted with their sinfulness and depravity and sought God's redemption. The visible signs of sinfulness and depravity included a "restless spirit," pleasure in youthful social activities, such as dancing, and the association with those who were not Christians. The second conversion experience also confirmed recognition of sinfulness and depravity, yet it was brought about by the uncertainties associated with old age, especially illness and a close proximity to death. Trials might be described as tests of faith throughout life, while a second conversion experience was essentially the coalescence of trials at the end of life leading to a confirmation or rejection of faith. After living through the financial uncertainties of widowhood, Martha Barnes "during the last few weeks of her life, possessed the same calm and serene state of mind, that characterized the former years of her Christian course; and she came to close with a will sweetly swallowed up in the will of God."[33] Barnes' conversion experience at the close of her life, therefore, was peaceful and serene, confirming her lifelong dependence on God.

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[33]Hunt, *Memoir of Mrs. Martha Barnes*, 41.

Abigail Waters also struggled with uncertainty at the close of her life. Near death, the heroine of the *Memoirs* agonized many nights over whether she was prepared for the final judgement. Waters' internal battle against uncertainty, the primary enemy of faith, represented an uncharacteristic break in an otherwise hopeful and inspiring tale of a remarkable Christian journey. She blamed her own sinfulness as the source of her unbearable suffering. "I get no relief in my head. If someone were striking upon it with a hammer, it seems as if the pain could not be greater than it is…Ah! If I had been as faithful a servant, as he has been a Master there would be no occasion for this."[34] The terrible pain made Abigail Waters grow impatient for her "transformation" into Heaven. "I long to be gone. Come Lord Jesus, my dear, dear, Savior, come quickley."[35] In the *Memoir*, Waters confronts ultimate despair when she questions God's purpose in keeping her alive. "I know not for what purpose God continues me here. It seems as if I must be a trouble to all my friends, and could be of no use to any of them."[36] Finally, after months of suffering, Waters confesses to her friends and family, and to the reader, that she has found piece of mind with the will of God. "I feel resigned to the will of God—I feel that I am God's creature, and God's property—that he has a right to do with me, as seemeth good in his sight."[37]

Whether aged women, like Martha Barnes, experienced "calm" resignation at the end of life or, like Abigail Waters, a more dramatic second conversion experience confirming faith, ultimately both memoirs successfully used aged women to illustrate the necessity of preparing the soul for Heaven. In one way, the Abigail Waters model of a

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[34]Huntington, *Memoir of Mrs. Abigail Waters*, 110.
[35] Ibid., 112.
[36] Ibid., 113.
[37] Ibid., 113.

Christian struggle was a more powerful source of instruction for readers than Martha Barnes' calm resignation because uncertainty, coupled with fear, made Waters' final confirmation of faith a more meaningful resolution. The *Memoir of Mrs. Martha Barnes* and the *Memoir of Abigail Waters* both indicate that trials in old age would test the faith. As didactic pieces of literature, however, they also serve as powerful reminders to old, middle-aged, and young readers alike that struggle was part of the journey through life and that they too must be ready for death whenever it came.

It is no coincidence to find evidence of a second conversion experience in the memoirs of aged women because part of the historical association between physical disability and old age comes from religious literature's calls for spiritual atonement at the end of life. Physical affliction was one way God called people to Him. Paula Scott, in *Growing Old in America*, suggests that old age and physical decline were linked in religious literature in order to encourage the aged to "redirect" their focus from the "transitory physical world to the eternal realm." Scott argues that "emphasizing sickness and dependency highlighted the elderly's proximity to death and was meant to spur efforts to prepare for future judgement."[38] Funerals were the most common forum in which pastors associated old age with decline, but, in general, sermons addressed to the aged made familiar the rhetoric of an alliance between advanced age and disability. For example, in a sermon delivered for the one-hundredth birthday of Tabitha Pearson, the theme was not one of celebration but on the fact that her "days were few" and "the decays of nature," evidenced by the hands that "tremble," the knees that "totter," and the eyes that "grow dim," meant her time of death was certainly near.[39]

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[38] Paula Scott, 23.
[39]Ebenezer Hill, *A Sermon delivered…on the birth-day of Mrs. Tabitha Pearson* (Amherst 1816), 5.

While not directly calling for a second conversion experience in old age, because in theory a second conversion was unnecessary, ministers urged the aged to recognize disability and illness as signs that they were close to the judgement day and to prepare their souls for it. The message to young members of the audience was not that they had plenty of time to accept God, but that their need for conversion was immediate because no one knew when death would come and "instances of manifest conversion in old age [were] very rare."[40] Ministers believed there would be no opportunity in old age for a first conversion experience. Again associating old age with infirmity, ministers argued that "the powers of the mind are enfeebled, and the strength of the body is impaired, a dismal train of aches and pains accompany, which often render them incapable of attending to *any thing*."[41] Aged women, such as Martha Barnes and Abigail Waters, were significant as model Christians for young people because they did not experience faith for the first time on their deathbed. Instead, they *confirmed* the faith in God that had been their companion since childhood and found it to be of remarkable comfort in the final hours of life.

While in memoirs and sermons exemplary Christian women displayed true faith in times of trial by resigning to the will of God and confirming their faith in a second conversion, memoirs also indicate a passive approach was not the only route to such a godly status. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, in "Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature 1668-1735," found that ministers recognized virtuous women, in general, as those who sought God early in life, prayed and fasted, loved to go to church,

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[40] Ibid., 14.

took notes in church, read the Bible multiple times, and engaged in spiritual discourse with others.[42] What Ulrich describes is an active approach to Christianity, not the passive resignation typically attributed to the final hours of life. Aged women could provide active models of Christian behavior. Memorial literature, especially memoirs and funeral sermons, indicate aged women were virtuous women *despite* the presence of disease and disability. Living to a venerable old age did not mean withdrawing from the world, although pastors thought it best, it meant continuing to actively participate in faith, *especially* when it was most difficult to do so.

Aged women excelled in worship and they were always praised for attending church, even when physical disability made it difficult. Under the heading, "Rare Fact," the author of *Memoir of Mrs. Martha Barnes* explained, "From the 70th to the 92d year of her age, she was absent from meeting on the Sabbath, only two half days. Whether rain or shine, the side-walk wet or dry, the sky clear or hazy, 'Mother Barnes' was sure to be at meeting."[43] Again referring to Barnes the *Memoir* read, "Often did her feeble limbs bear her attendance impossible. When she became so feeble and infirm (the result of age) that it would have been thought excusable for her to be absent, she would still be there. Often has she been seen there, when it was only after repeated and most laborious efforts that she could reach the place of worship; but having done that, all fatigue seemed to be forgotten, and she enjoyed the ordinances of God with peculiar delight."[44] In old age Barnes also excelled in private worship. "It was her practice for the last two or three years of her life, before retiring to rest at night, to read a chapter in the Old or New

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[41] Ibid., 13.
[42] Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature 1668-1735," *American Quarterly* 28 (1976), 24-26.
[43] Hunt, *Memoir of Mrs. Martha Barnes*, 37.

Testament; and when she had retired, to review the chapter so far as her memory would serve, beginning with the first verse."[45]

According to the *Memoir of Mrs. Abigail Waters*, Waters too was "a regular and devout attendant upon public worship…till about eighteen months prior to her death."[46] Even when she was bedridden, blind, and nearly deaf she rejoiced in worship. In a final letter of instruction to her children and grandchildren that was attached to the *Memoirs*, Abigail Waters advised they "Love the house and public worship of God" and that they always "Keep the Lord's day holy."[47] The fact that elderly women, such as Martha Barnes and Abigail Waters, continued to make the effort to go to church, even when their feeble body made it difficult, served to inspire others to engage in worship. It was an example of piety especially directed to a younger generation of women who had no physical excuses.

Length of life and the experiences associated with a "protracted pilgrimage" were significant, but the perception of death for people in old age also contributed to elderly women's well-integrated position in society as exemplars. Unlike young women, who were described as "short lived" rays regrettably dying in the "blossom of life," the "bloom of health," or "like (a) blossom'd tree o'erturn'd by vernal storm," elderly persons, in short, were expected to die.[48] Ministers, anxious to make young members of their audience aware of the perils of death for unsaved souls, were especially prone to single out aged members of their congregation to illustrate the importance of preparing

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[44] Ibid., 45.
[45] Ibid., 37.
[46] Huntingtion, *Memoir of Mrs. Abigail Waters*, 82.
[47] Ibid., 128.

the soul for the immediacy of death. Physical decline in old age nearly always symbolized the immediacy of death, or at least the impermanence of life.

In the language of memorial literature, death during old age was viewed as quite natural. A passage from ninety-two-year-old Mary Smith's funeral read, "All nature consents that the aged should die; that when their sphere of usefulness and comfort is past, they should close their wearisome pilgrimage; drop their clay tabernacle in the dust; and pass into another and immortal state of existence."[49] The perception of death as natural in old age was also supported by the use of natural metaphors.[50] Ninety-two-year-old Mary Smith "[came] to the grave as a shock of corn in its season, fully ripe."[51] In another example from the period, ninety-one-year-old Mary Sexton, "lived out the remnant of her days. The wheels of nature were not broken, but they were worn out…she has died in a good old age, and has left for imitation a bright example of diligence, faithfulness, amiableness and piety."[52]

Funeral sermons for aged women often confirmed the appropriateness of death by referring to a verse found in the fourth chapter of Timothy in the Bible: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day." Aged *Christian* women by virtue of their age and commendable life had "finished their course." For example, eighty-three-year-old "mother in Israel," Lydia Potwine, battled against sin her entire life but according to her funeral sermon, "her

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[48]Alden, *Collections*, 117, 32.
[49] Alden, *Collections*, vol. 1, 89.
[50] See Terri Premo's, *Winter Friends*, for a discussion of how natural metaphors were used in diary literature to describe the aging process. Premo argues, "witnessing their own physical decline at life's end, aging women took solace if not delight in the realization that they were working hand in hand with nature," 142.
[51] Alden, *Collections*, vol, I, 92.

warfare [was] accomplished, her victory gained."[53] Potwine's death was not to be lamented because, "the honour of religion and the truth of the word of God," the pastor instructed, "make it our duty to hope that she has gone to be with Christ…without pain, or sorrow, or distressing care."[54] Of course, only God could determine when the course was truly finished, but pastors often viewed the journey as more complete in old age. "Every man is immortal 'till he has finished the work which God has assigned him'."[55]

The fact that aged members of society were expected to be near the end of life does not mean to suggest that after death elderly women were not missed. In fact, there is ample evidence in memorial literature to support the notion that the death of elderly women left a considerable hole in their immediate family. When Ann Warren died at age sixty-five, the pastor suggested "to her afflicted family the loss is peculiarly great; and it is irreparable. The duties of a wife and of a parent she discharged with the most tenderness and fidelity."[56] Maternal duties were also recalled by the children of eighty-five-year-old Phebe Strong who inscribed on her tombstone, "We loved, but not enough, the gentle hand, that reared us. Gladly would we now recall that softest friend, a mother, whose mild converse and faithful counsel we in vain regret."[57] In a like manner, sixty-six-year-old Martha Roads died, "beloved, honoured, lamented. Her daughter, deeply sensible of the loss she has sustained by the death of so tender a parent, has erected this monument to record the virtues of the dead and the gratitude of the living."[58]

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[52]Levi Collins, *A sermon preached...at the funeral of Mrs. Mary Sexton*, (Hartford 1807), 19.
[53] Shubael Bartlett, *A sermon preached...at the funeral of Mrs. Lydia Potwine*, (Hartford 1818), 17.
[54] Ibid., 17.
[55] William Ripley, *A sermon delivered at the Funeral of Mrs. Elizabeth Mason*, (Norwich 1810), 10.
[56] Thomas Skelton, *A sermon occasioned by the death of Mrs Ann Warren*, (Dedham 1816), 14.
[57] Alden, *Collections*, vol. III, 78.
[58] Alden, *Collections*, vol. I, 64.

While the loss of a caring mother was great for adult children, the loss of elderly women from the immediate family was particularly great for aged men who relied on their wives for physical and emotional support in their old age. Pastor William Ripley reflected at the funeral of seventy-eight-year-old Elizabeth Mason, "To her husband her loss is great—is irreparable. She has gone and left him in the evening of life, and laboring under numerous bodily weaknesses."[59] Pastor Ripley tried to comfort the bereaved husband by noting that the, "mother, the wife, of your bosom, your steady and faithful companion in all your joys and sorrows, for more than fifty years, has left you, and slumbers in death. This loss nothing in this world can repair; under it nothing here can afford you substantial comfort and support."[60]

The inevitability of death only meant elderly women's role as instructors for society, especially young women, was well achieved. Young women could only demonstrate the potential to be virtuous while old women were established testaments to their sex. One inscription for a fourteen-year-old girl illustrates the tragedy associated with early death; "Sprightliness and activity, united with strength of mind, excited a lively hope in the breasts of her friends, that she would become an ornament and blessing to society; but death, alas! Prematurely blighted the fair prospect by arresting this lovely maid in the morn of life."[61]

In addition, unlike young women who left unfinished business, such as children to care for, elderly women had "finished their course" and were in a perfect position to be instructors. The "unfinished" business young women left behind is reflected in the fact that the authors of their tombstone inscriptions were nearly always bereaved husbands

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[59] William Ripley, *A sermon delivered at the funeral of Mrs. Elizabeth Mason*, (Norwich 1810), 17.
[60] Ibid., 18.

who lamented that their spouses' services would be dearly missed, especially by young children. An inscription composed for forty-three-year-old Maria Lippitt read, "She left a disconsolate husband and weeping children to mourn a loss, which no mounmental stone can describe or earthly treasure make good, for her price was far above rubies."[62] Elderly women too left bereaved husbands and adult children, but advanced age made their loss less dramatic and better accepted by loved ones. At the funeral of sixty-six-year-old Ansenath Harrison, Pastor Chauncey Lee consoled, "Her race is run -her work is finished, and her place in every relation will be known no more;-her place…empty…but her place will never be empty in our hearts."[63]

In conclusion, one final point about the role of elderly women as exceptional *women* is necessary. There is considerable literature to support the idea that women during the nineteenth century used the ideology of womanhood to their own advantage. Women historians, however, who have interpreted the ideology of domesticity in primarily a restrictive and negative fashion have recognized, and sometimes blamed, men as the central propagandists of this ideology. Barbara Welter, in "The Cult of True Womanhood," argues that men, busy with the cares of public life, "could salve his conscience by reflecting that he had left behind a hostage" in the home to keep the higher values.[64] The evidence presented in tombstone inscriptions, death notices, funeral sermons, and memoirs, however, implies that the reputation of elderly women as exemplar women was also used in the public memory to enforce models of good

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[61] Alden, *Collections*, vol. IV, 107.
[62] Alden, *Collections*, vol. IV, 106.
[63] Chauncey Lee, *A sermon delivered at the funeral of Mrs. Asenath Harrison,* (Poughkeepsie 1816), 18.

behavior. Unlike young women, who were the primary targets of behavioral guides, elderly women were expected to be past the age of passion and were poised to be men tors and educators. It is clear from the historical record, not only did elderly women actively participate in the creation of an ideology of domesticity, their reputation as exemplar models of womanhood helped to maintain this structure by enforcing it in the language of memory.

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[64] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966), 151.

CHAPTER IV

Memorial literature indicates that elderly women, by virtue of their advanced age and role as women, achieved a well-integrated place in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century America. Elderly women's status as *women* granted them patriotic respect as republican mothers and grandmothers, devoted wives, and moral guardians of a young nation. Age did not shape a totally new identity for elderly women, but it did serve to enhance their respected position in society as women by making them exemplars of their sex, "relicts" of their husbands, and "mother(s) in Israel" in the church. Aged women, it seems, had demonstrated their worth as "good women" and worthy Christians longer than most individuals in their society and had a reputation for being perfectly "feminine."[1]

There is one aspect of aged women's social reputation as exemplary women, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, that did not contribute to their lofty place in the hearts and minds of the public. Aged women, unlike young women, were not esteemed as *physically* beautiful. The passage of years unwittingly played a callous trick on women of advanced age. On the one hand, time bestowed on them the opportunity to receive supplementary esteem as exemplary women, yet on the other hand it also etched on their bodies the physical signs that they were no longer valued as the *same* women they were twenty or thirty years before. Aged women, after all, were "venerable" women, women who had experienced a "protracted pilgrimage," a "long life," not young women whose youthful beauty could communicate their social worth.

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[1]Terri Premo, *Winter Friends: Women Growing Old in the New Republic, 1785-1835* (Urbana: University of Chicago, 1990), 109.

Certainly, the fact physical beauty was not applied to aged women does not mean to suggest that elderly women were somehow regarded as less "feminine" because they bore the physical signs of old age. Aged women could easily be included in the ideology of womanhood, but *only* when it referred to the role they played as mothers and wives or to abstract ideals of goodness and morality. The ideology of womanhood, when incorporating the concept of feminine beauty, did not apply to aged women's bodies. In referring to how men perceived elderly women, Terri Premo suggests that "aged saints, one must suppose, no longer had bodies."[2] Premo argues that elderly women "no longer had bodies" because men attributed the same "purity, piety, and virtue" to elderly women as they did to young women, so that in terms of their visibility it did not matter what the physical effects of age were.[3]

In contrast, this chapter suggests that aged women's beauty was placed outside the context of the physical body and redefined in old age as virtuous *behavior*. Both young and old women were beautiful, but in different ways. Beauty for elderly Christian women, especially "mother(s) in Israel," for example, would be associated with the beauty and glories of Heaven that awaited them after their "protracted pilgrimage" was complete. Feminine beauty signified potential for young women, while for old women it signified the successful completion of a journey. The physical limitations of advanced age often served to enhance the value accorded to an elderly woman's ability to continue performing her virtuous role as woman. Aged women, therefore, we re beautiful both despite the passage of time and, perhaps more importantly, *because* of it.

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[2] Terri Premo, "Women Growing Old in the New Republic: Personal Responses to Old Age, 1785-1835" (Ph.D. diss., University of Cincinnati, 1983), 35. Interestingly, Premo finds European men in America nearly always observed the physical changes in aging women and noted a "loss of homage" as the result of fading beauty and youth.

Elderly Women as "Withered Roses"

The physical effects of aging were not a topic of discussion in memorial literature and this silence makes it clear that family members did not want their relatives to be remembered for grey hair, wrinkles, or age spots. The silence can be explained, in part, by the fact that memorial literature was dedicated to higher purposes. It was not the place of tombstone inscriptions, death notices, funeral sermons, or memoirs to dwell on the physical form because overall, it had passed away. After death, the only attribute worth public attention was the extraordinary reputation elderly women left behind. In addition, as ministers warned, the physical signs of old age were meant to be signs of impending death, not indicators of social esteem on earth. In memorial literature, therefore, physical change in old age only had meaning to the extent it represented an individual's final preparation for the spiritual afterlife.

While memorial literature was dedicated to higher purposes, there is another even more subtle explanation for why memorial literature failed to include the physical signs of aging for women. In short, memorial literature, by remaining completely silent on the issue, revealed that the visible signs of old age, for women at least, were not highly valued by society.[4] Obviously, memorial literature does not explicitly indicate such sentiments but the aversion to discuss the physical signs of old age for elderly women is best illustrated by memorial literature's special attention to the appearance of *young*

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[3] Ibid., 33.

[4] This idea exists in some tension with what scholars have previously assumed about the degree individuals accepted old age in the past. Terri Premo suggests, in *Winter Friends*, that "old people in years past seldom felt the need to deny their age" because old age "held out the promise of veneration and the hope of a divine redemption," 2. David Hackett Fischer explains, in *Growing Old in America*, that because old age was "venerated" before the American Revolution men and women tended to wear white wigs and dress in a manner to make them look "old." While it may be basically true that men and women were expected to act their age, memorial literature illustrates that the visible signs of old age were not as highly esteemed as

women. It was not that aged women "no longer had bodies," as Premo suggested, but that young women apparently did. This final point is deceptive. If the purpose of memorial literature was to take attention away from the physical and place it on the spiritual, why were young women described in physical terms?

An explanation for why young women "had bodies" and older women did not may be found in how society perceived the death of young and old women. In tombstone inscriptions, young women were described as "short lived" rays regrettably dying in the "blossom of life," the "bloom or health," or "like (a) blossom'd tree o'ertum'd by vernal storm."[5] As suggested in the previous chapter, such metaphors signified the impression among ministers and family members that, in contrast to young women, aged women were expected to be near death. It was the loss of potential that made young women's death particularly tragic.

In the context of memorial literature, physical *beauty* best represented this loss of potential. When twenty-three-year-old Martha Rogers died in 1785, her tombstone read, "Like blossom'd tree, o'erturn'd by vernal storm, Lovely in death, the beauteous ruin lies."[6] In a similar way, Oceana Harris, at age fourteen, was remembered as "early, bright, transient, chaste as morning dew" in short, "she sparkled" before premature death dampened her youthful radiance.[7] The association between beauty and potential is well demonstrated by the funeral sermon for sixteen-year-old Miss Jane Means. "To human appearance few persons had ever a fairer prospect of life, or stronger reasons for desiring it. Her unobtrusive, modest deportment, her suavity of disposition, joined to no common

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previously assumed. If, as the Bible instructed, the "hoary head [was] a crown of glory," one might assume it would have been noticed as a symbolic source of respect in memorial literature, but it was not.

[5]Reverend Timothy Alden, *A Collection of American Epitaphs and Inscriptions with Occasional Notes* vol. I (New York 1814), 117, 32.

share of personal beauty, secured to her among her acquaintance, that affectionate regard, which, to all, but, *especially*, to the young, is so highly gratifying. Never, perhaps, was a livelier bloom of health exhibited in the youthful visage."[8]

The same emphasis on beauty as symbolic of potential may also be seen in popular literature. The following poem, published in 1746 in the *American Magazine*, illustrated the historical association between the death of young women and the tragic loss of potential as symbolized by the untimely loss of beauty:

Epitaph on a young Lady

Here Innocence and Beauty Lies,
The Mother's Pride and Father's Joys:
Death too untimely cropt the Rose;
And laid her softly to repose;
Yet shall the Fair at last arise,
And throng with Angels to her native
Skies.[9]

Elderly women had already achieved their expected potential as women by being virtuous mothers and wives for an extended period of time. Their beauty did not need to be outwardly representative of an exemplar status in memorial literature because the virtuous actions they exhibited for such a long time sufficed as evidence in the public's mind. In addition, while memorial literature does not state so, young women's beauty was necessary to achieving what elderly women had already experienced as the defining moment in their lives: marriage. It was important for young women to be remembered as beautiful because the authors of memorial literature needed to emphasis the partic ular

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[6] Ibid., 137.
[7] Ibid., 108.
[8] Ibid., vol. II, 133.
[9] *American Magazine*, "Epitaph on a young Lady" (March 1746), 130.

tragedy their lost beauty represented to society. Beauty was power for young women. Women who died in the "bloom" of youth did not have the opportunity to use their beauty to attract a mate and marry, nor did many young women have a chance to give birth to patriotic sons.

In the context of memorial literature, it is easy to simply attribute the absence of any references to aged women's physical appearance to the association between old age and the expectation of death. Aged women were considered to be beyond the desirable age of passion and no longer in need of physical perfection, only moral excellence. Living to an advanced age, elderly women had already fulfilled their potential. There is, however, more to the story. Based on the language of tombstone inscriptions, death notices, funeral sermons, and memoirs, respect on earth required women, both old and young, to be *good* more than it required them to be beautiful. It was, however, elderly women's special responsibility to be good because they were expected to be the exemplars for a younger generation of women. In a scathing commentary on the subject of old women acting their age, one author of *The Lady's Magazine*, an early magazine targeted to women, wrote:

> "The time…is past when nature has attractions for love; and wisdom and discretion ought to supply the place of personal Beauty. They ought to be counsellors to the young, and not imitators of folly; they ought now to use that experience which they have acquired, to teach the young to avoi d the errors into which themselves may have fallen, by an overweening attention to external ornament, and being more desirous to catch men, than to attract minds."[10]

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[10] "Fruitless Search after an Old Man" *The Ladies Magazine; and Repository of Entertaining Knowledge* vol I (Philadelphia 1792), 75.

It was true that elderly women needed to be especially good, in part, because they were no longer valued as beautiful. To be considered good, elderly women did not need to act in a manner different from what was appropriate for their age. Terri Premo argues that elderly women who attempted to look, dress, or act younger than their age "exposed themselves to ridicule."[11] For example, a humorous article found in *Ladies Magazine*, entitled "Fruitless Search after an Old Women," describes the desperate attempt of one late eighteenth-century man to find a woman who would willingly identify herself as "old."[12] According to the author, who only calls himself "A Virtuoso," "I was once so zealous, as imprudently to ask a lady of sixty-five, whether she reckoned herself an old woman? I had some expectations from her will…but, I believe, she cancelled her will that afternoon."[13] The attempt of "A Virtuoso" to find an "old woman" also led him to a house where he found a "woman…I believe, and full sixty-four, but no old woman, for she had on a monstrous Nina cap—her hair hanging in ringlets down her back—a sash round her waist, &c."[14] The article was humorous to readers of the *Ladies Magazine* because old women, women who should have known better, were trying to disassociate themselves from old age by changing their appearance. Readers knew individuals could not hide their age because the aging process itself was not something within human control. In maintaining their silence on the subject, the authors of memorial literature confirmed that elderly women could only embrace the aging process as natural and in accordance with God's plan. Only fools tried to interfere.

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[11] Premo, *Winter Friends*, 113.
[12] "Fruitless Search after an Old Woman" *The Ladies Magazine; and Repository of Entertaining Knowledge* vol I (Philadelphia 1792), 207.
[13] Ibid., 207.
[14] Ibid., 207.

Could elderly women be good without being beautiful? Memorial literature certainly seems to suggest aged women were particularly good women in old age and often regarded as exemplars of their sex. Historically, however, no matter what degree women's esteem was tied to the ability to be good, the fact still remained that feminine beauty was always associated with moral superiority. As the historian Lois Banner discovered, in *American Beauty*, the very word "beauty" derives from the Latin *bellus*, meaning good.[15] It is a concept that has a long historical association with women. Foreshadowing gender distinctions in early America, Banner argues the Greeks attributed ambition to male virtue while beauty was a particularly female virtue that indicated a good character.[16] Thomas Cole confirms the historical association between women and beauty, in *The Journey of Life*, by explaining that during the fifteenth century, when aged women made their first appearance in visual representations of the life cycle, the emphasis was always on their ability to maintain "health, beauty, and physical comportment."[17] Cole finds that bourgeois culture came to associate the body with the soul, so that being beautiful was a sign of divine presence. Cole also argues that "beauty became a kind of vocation or sacred duty for women" as medical manuals on feminine beauty became popular in sixteenth-century Europe.[18]

Nineteenth-century conduct manuals in America would also require women to maintain their physical beauty as a part of creating a pleasing home environment away from the world.[19] It is peculiar, then, that elderly women, as the moral exemplars of the young nation, were excluded from the concept of physical beauty. It was equally their

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[15] Lois Banner, *American Beauty* (New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 1983), 10.
[16] Ibid., 10.
[17] Thomas Cole, *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 26.

responsibility to maintain a respectable home and provide a pleasing environment away from the world. If elderly women were exemplars why could they not be described as both beautiful *and* good, like young women?

One explanation of why beauty was not part of elderly women's goodness can be found outside memorial literature. Before aged women were put on a pedestal as the exemplars of their sex, devoid of a physical presence, their aging bodies were recognized and the connection between women and old age was not a positive one. John Murphy, in *The Image of Old Age and the Elderly in Preindustrial America*, investigates the status of elderly men and women by analyzing fiction and non-fiction found in magazines published between 1744 and 1865. Murphy finds that "the data depicting the ill effects of age physically seem to imply that men lose their strength, and women their beauty (each an important factor in determining sex role statuses—weak males and ugly women were not coveted in early American society any more than they are today.)"[20] The following poem from a 1745 issue of the *American Magazine*, best illustrates the historically negative association between old age and a loss of beauty in women:

To a LADY with a withered Rose

How transient is the fairest face!
Soft beauty's gayest charms
How vain!
This rose, dear Cloe, lately shone
The brightest glory of the plain:
It blossom'd like the ruddy morn,

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[18] Ibid., 26.
[19] Banner, 9.
[20] John Murphy, "The Image of Old Age and the Elderly in Preindustrial America: A Content Analysis of Selected Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Magazines" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Illinois University, 1979), 74.

All pregnant with ethereal dew,
Diffus'd ambrosial sweets around,
And blush'd almost as bright as you.
Alas! How chang'd its damask pride!
Ah! Where is now that soft perfume?
That glow that swell'd the arched leaf,
The orient dye, the fragrant bloom?
All shrivel'd, faded, and decay'd,
Now drooping low its pallid head,
No longer grateful to the sense,
All its bright glories now are fled.

Tis thus, dear Cloe, thus thy charms,
Now shining like the new-born day
Each splendid blooming grace shall lose,
And like this wither'd rose decay.
That snowy skin, those killing eyes,
Must perish with the circling years;
Old age with hoary hairs comes on,
And every beauty disappears.
Learn then with charms to deck thy mind,
Those graces that can n'er decay,
Nor feel the wasteful hand of time,
Nor fall the flying age's prey.

The beauties of the mind alone,
Still verdant in eternal bloom,
No baneful change of Season know,
Nor with the frost of age consume.
But in immortal youth shall live,
When all that gay attracting form,
Which wond'ring mortals now admire
Shall nourish the devouring worm.[21]

While the poem, "To a Lady with a Withered Rose," actually addresses young women, compelling them to developing their minds, the impermanence of beauty as a source of power is the underlying theme. Young women were in the "bloom" of life while old women were likened to "withered roses." Women were taught early not to trust

[21] *American Magazine*, "To a Lady with a withered Rose" (June 1745), 266-267.

their beauty to guide them through the course of life; it was like a fading flower that would not last.

Other early poems equated old age in women with a loss of physical presence. In a poem entitled "The True Beauty," the author writes:

Tell me not of faces fair,
Coral lips, or jetty hair;
Rosy cheeks, and dimpled chin,
Fit to tempt a saint to sin;
Sparkling eyes, and snowy brests;
Beauties by thy nymph possess.
Fairest faces will decay;
Jetty tresses soon turn grey;
Rosy cheeks must lose their dye;
Dimness seize the sparkling eye:
All that now is sweet, and fair,
Time will wrinkle and impair.[22]

The emphasis in early literature, therefore, was not necessarily on the negative image of old age but on the impermanence of beauty for young women. In, "The Progress of Life. Written by a Female Hand," the author compared youth to the "Morning Sun" and used youthful beauty to represent the "World's Prospect." After time passed, the author lamented, "Oh! Too soon alas! We climb, Scarce feeling we ascend the gently rising Hill of Time, From whence with Grief we see our Prime, and all its Sweetness end."[23] It is significant that it is the "female hand" that equated physical loss in old age with a loss of beauty. Older women warned young women to "observe each Day the Changes of your Face, Nor vainly think the Error's in the Glass. The Rose and Lilly, now distinctly shown, May blend with Age, and mix into a Brown."[24]

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[22] *American Magazine*, "The True Beauty" (September 1744), 565.
[23] *American Magazine*, "The Progress of Life. Written by a Female Hand" (March 1745), 128.
[24] *American Magazine*, "Advice to a young Lady just after her Marriage" (December 1744), 699.

Elderly Women as Beautiful

While memorial literature was silent on the topic of elderly women's physical presentation, it was not silent on their moral rectitude. From the perspective of family, friends, ministers, and newspaper editors, elderly women were beautiful because they *behaved* in a virtuous manner. Because of the outstanding qualities aged women were thought to possess, as experienced mothers, grandmothers, wives, and exemplar Christians, physical beauty did not need to be applied to the equation of femininity in order for elderly women to be memorialized as "good women."

The concept of beauty was redefined for women in old age to include the value of their "protracted pilgrimage." This was especially true for "mother(s) in Israel" in the church. For example, eighty-three-year-old Lydia Potwine was remembered at her death as "one of the brightest ornaments" of her church. Her friends had "reason to hope that the church in heaven hath gained one of its brightest stars, that shall shine in the beauty of holiness, through rich grace, with increasing splendor, for ever and ever."[25] Lydia Potwine was beautiful, therefore, not because she possessed eternal youth but because she exhibited the fine qualities of an exemplar Christian. The beauty and glory that was Heaven were applied to aged women's physical body in old age.

There are very few examples from memorial literature to references of physical beauty in old age; instead writers focused on the spiritual beauty that connoted moral superiority. Whether it was because old women were not viewed as beautiful as young women or because elderly women were expected to be good more than physically attractive is not clear from the sources in this paper. It is apparent, however, that beauty

was not necessary for elderly women to be viewed as morally excellent. Their physical beauty had "withered" but their exemplar status remained unchanged. In many ways this is what memorial literature was trying to convey to its readers. During the post-Revolutionary period, it was more important for women to be virtuous than physically beautiful. Virtuous behavior left a fine reputation in its wake, while beauty was only as temporary as the morning dew.

[25] Shubael Bartlett, "A Sermon preached…at the funeral of Mrs. Lydia Potwine" (Hartford 1818), 17.

CHAPTER V

The history of old age is an unusual story to write because it has no beginning and no end. There are no famous individuals to represent its change over time, and only vague notions of what old age actually was or how it should be defined in the past. Do scholars treat old age as a life stage or a process? As defined in memorial literature, old age was a final life stage, bestowing on elderly women a measure of respect as exemplary women, especially exemplary *Christian* women. Old age, however, was also the culmination of an aging process that began at birth and successfully ended when elderly women had "finished their course."

No matter if the passage of time was viewed as a sequence of life stages or an indiscriminate process, memorial literature indicates that, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the end of the journey was gendered with masculine and feminine qualities. Elderly women were not members of an anonymous "elderly" population, as scholars once presumed. Instead, aged women were best esteemed for their reputation as *women*. They were considered valuable mothers, grandmothers, wives, and Christians before they were memorialized, or even "venerated," as elders. This finding is important because it provides striking evidence that elderly women were not separate from the rest of the population, as most scholars have treated them when recognizing their presence at all, but that they were an integral part of it. Understanding elderly women as *women* is also significant in answering Abigail Waters' question of "usefulness" in old age. As *women*, women of advanced years were "useful" to the degree that they would continue to be models for younger members of their sex.

Indeed, age was important in memorial literature, but only to the degree it served to enhance elderly women's reputation as women. Only women of advanced age were considered "relicts" of their husbands or "mother(s) in Israel" in the church. Living a long life meant that elderly women had perfected their role as women better that anyone else in society and could provide "useful" instruction to younger women. Age did not enhance women's physical presence, but that did not matter to the authors of memorial literature. While elderly women were no longer considered beautiful, physical attractiveness was not an essential ingredient for excellence. In fact, as popular literature indicated, beauty was only a fading flower. Virtuous behavior was everlasting and represented best by women of advanced age.

Memorial literature does not indicate, for example, the degree to which the social "reality" of aging fit into such cultural representations of elderly women as exemplary women. Were aged women *actually* valued as women before they were recognized as elders? Was being good *actually* better than being beautiful? Memorial literature also does not reveal if women beyond the middle and upper classes were respected in old age. Only women whose family could afford to pay for tombstone inscriptions, death notices, funeral sermons, and memoirs are represented in this paper.

A study of this kind inevitably produces more questions than answers and historians are only beginning to see the value of integrating gender into the study of historical gerontology. The questions and insights that come from integrating gender into the study of old age are invaluable to understanding the essential meaning of old age in the past. The final section of this chapter will introduce some questions that future scholars might apply to historical gerontology using gender as an analytical framework.

Future Areas of Research:

Elderly Women as the perfect Old people?

In his article entitled, "Old Women: Some Historical Observations," Peter Stearns suggests that based on modern France, aged women appear to be the ideal elderly people. Stearns finds that because women outlived men, old age was increasingly feminized, taking on some characteristics, such as dependency, that women possessed. In addition, Stearns finds that even within an unfavorable cultural sphere that viewed post-menopausal women with disdain because of their inability to have children, women not only consistently outlived men but were also able to build on existing family and personal relationships to achieve a good old age. In fact, Stearns argues that family and connection to others were women's saving grace during the late nineteenth century; without both women might not have been as successful, or as equally unsuccessful, as men in simply surviving to old age.[1]

Peter Stearns' conclusions about modern France raises some important questions for the study of aging in post-revolutionary America. Is it possible that old women in post-revolutionary America were in the best position to *be* elderly? As does Stearns, Terri Premo makes family and personal connections a fundamental part of her argument that women's roles, especially those of mother and wife, were crucial in making the transition into old age less traumatic. Premo finds continuity, not discontinuity, in the lives of aged women who continued to serve as mothers to their adult children in addition to assuming new self-affirming responsibilities, such as the role of grandmother.

[1] Peter N. Stearns "Old Women: Some Historical Observations" *Journal of Family History* (Spring 1980), 53.

Memorial literature, with its emphasis on remembering the deceased as exemplar *women*, also suggests that the continuation of gender roles was indeed an important element of social identification in old age. Contemporary studies of aging in America have suggested that the continuation of gender roles can explain why women adapt better to old age than men do. The editors of *Culture and Aging*, a study of aging in American cities, for example, support the idea that while interpersonal relationships change in old age, women often remain active as helpers and friends, continuing to use skills perfected as mother and wife. This study also argues "there is a greater continuity with past self-image and earlier roles for women than for men. The adult female role in America is largely based on personal attitudes or qualities rather than on achievements in various activities. Consequently, traits such as 'friendliness,' 'warmth,' or 'generosity' are important in the role of younger women, but need not disappear as she becomes old."[2]

Arguments for the value of role continuity and connection to others may be relevant to understanding how aged women coped as well as they did in old age, but such an analysis tends to distort reality. The assumption that *only* a continuation of gender roles can explain why women were in the best position to be elderly ignores the fact that there were no logical role exits during the post-revolutionary period to prevent aged men from also living a good old age.[3] For men, there was no mandatory retirement to associate old age with a change in occupation. David Hackett Fischer discovered men in their seventies teaching school and holding public office, as well as pastors who refused to relinquish their churches even when poor health interrupted their ability to continue

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[2]Margaret Clark and Barbara Gallatin Anderson, eds., *Culture and Aging: An Anthropological Study of Older Americans* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1967), 100
[3]Carol Haber, *Beyond Sixty-Five: The Dilemma of Old Age in America's Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 10.

ministering from the pulpit.[4] Fischer argues that not until after the American Revolution, when presumably there was a devaluation of age, was mandatory retirement from work implemented.

Memorial literature indicates that aged men were consistently remembered for holding public office or esteemed for activities they engaged in during middle age. In some cases, memorial literature even uncovers men of advanced age continuing to serve in public office. Eighty-year old Samuel Bishop was remembered on his tombstone as being "town clerk of New Haven 54 years; its representative at 54 sessions of the general assembly; judge of the county and probate courts" and having "died mayor of the city, and collector of the port."[5] The evidence from memorial literature seems to imply that while men may have been subject to a change in public status after the Revolution, the same role status that sustained them during their younger years theoretically continued to exist in old age. Most men, like women, in early America simply worked until they died and did not experience the same discontinuity that contemporary society tends to associate with old age.

Despite some of the problems with associating a "good old age" exclusively with women, there is still historical validity to the notion that women during the post-revolutionary period were in the best position to be elderly. Continuity, however, was not necessarily in the continuation of activities associated with women or men, but at an ideological level that associated old age with virtues traditionally associated with femininity. Stearns found the feminization of old age in modern France to be related to

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[4] David Hackett Fischer, *Growing Old in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 44.

longevity statistics, which favored women over men. Even during the 1980s, Stearns suggests there were about 40 percent more old women, at age seventy, than men, though women only composed a little over half of the total French population.[6] Demographic evidence for post-revolutionary America does not break down the population by sex, but some regional studies have suggested that women did survive men by at least a few years.[7] In American culture, therefore, women did outlive men, but not to the dramatic degree Stearns argued created a feminization of old age in France.

The association of old age with femininity was more closely related to the feminization of American culture as a whole. Women in American culture made the ideal elderly persons because they were most closely associated with the values Americans cherished as that time. For example, Andrew Achenbaum, in *Old Age in the New Land*, argues members of the elderly population were the guardians of virtue. Achenbaum writes, "poets, essayists, scientists, and others writing between 1790 and 1860 claimed that, with few exceptions, the aged's moral faculties were highly developed. Virtue attained mainly through righteous living led to the conclusion that older people of all stations were generally paragons of virtuous behavior. Americans prior to the Civil war considered it advantageous to rely on elderly men and women to help direct and safeguard the moral development of the young nation."[8] In the context of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries this i dea of virtue had a gender specific meaning. Women, not men, were esteemed as the moral exemplars of society.

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[5] Reverend Timothy Alden, *A Collection of American Epitaphs and Inscriptions with Occasional Notes* Vol. I (New York 1814), 274.
[6] Stearns, 53.
[7] John Faragher, "Old Women and Old Men in Seventeenth-Century Wethersfield, Connecticut" Women's Studies vol. 4 (1976), 13. Faragher finds that aged women constituted the majority of the elderly population in Wethersfield.

In addition, the image of a good old age was supported by the ideology of domesticity. Achenbaum found that "Americans between 1790 and 1860 invariably extolled the elderly's contributions in the home. Widely circulated magazines and almanacs were frequently illustrated with essays, vignettes, etchings, and poems about the aged's value in performing domestic duties. Sentimental portraits reinforced the value of special services older men and women fulfilled in the home. Observers pointed out that the elderly taught manners and served as models of behavior."[9] As the moral guardians of the nation, women of any age, during the late eighteenth an d early nineteenth centuries, were already associated with the home. Elderly women, therefore, were not just perfect *women*, they were in the perfect position, literally, to be the ideal elderly people.

Finally, the concept that the ideology of old age and domesticity were supported and maintained by each other raises the question of which came first? Did the feminization of American culture lead to the feminization of old age? Initial evidence would seem to suggest that old age was always associated with dependence and distinctly feminine values. Terri Premo argues that domesticity and virtue were always specifically associated with old women so that their model provided a readily available portrait of behavior for other women.[10] Memorial literature indicates, however, that the feminization of American culture as a whole influenced the speed at which the association between femininity and old age was recognized in the public sphere.

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[8] Andrew Achenbaum, *Old Age in the New Land: The American Experience since 1790* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 16.
[9] Ibid., 23.
[10] Premo, 109.

What were the Implications of Gender Identity for Aged Men?

Gender identification was more important than age in the organization of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century society, bequeathing elderly women respect as *women* before they were venerated as elders. Gender as a category of analysis, however, might also give scholars a better understanding of aged men in post-Revolutionary society. What, then, are the implications of including gender identity for our understanding of elderly men? If the best attributes of womanhood were used to construct an image of old age, how were aged men understood?

A cursory examination of tombstone inscriptions and death notices suggests a few avenues for future scholarship. In contrast to women, who were actually granted elevated respect as aged women, men were viewed as weak when placed in the category of old age. While women grew in prestige as they aged, men became less authoritative, more confined to the home and associated with family life, and more mellow with age. In fact, aged men came to be associated with the qualities traditionally associated with women. The following passage from Edmund Burke's, "Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful," illustrates the different attitudes between men and *aged* men:

> "The authority of a father, so useful to our well-being, and so justly venerable upon all accounts, hinders us from having that entire love for him that we have for our mothers, where the parental authority is almost melted down into the mother's fondness and indulgence. But we generally have a great love for our grandfathers, in whom this authority is removed a degree from us, and where the weakness of age mellows it into something of a feminine partiality."[11]

[11]Vivien Jones, *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 3

Men of advanced years, therefor were easily identified with the qualities traditionally associated with women.

Memorial literature compensated for "the weakness of age" by honoring the past glories of aged men. This denial of the present was especially true of Revolutionary War heroes. Andrew Achenbaum argues that "older people's first-hand accounts of heroic bravery and steadfast loyalty to the revolutionary cause were uplifting examples of patriotism for everyone to follow. Fourth of July festivities and groundbreaking ceremonies were not complete until audiences heard speeches by Revolutionary War veterans and acknowledged the presence of other survivors in the crowd.[12]

Two of the pioneering scholars in the field of historical gerontology, David Hackett Fischer and Andrew Achenbaum, have suggested that "the elderly" declined in status overtime. More work needs to be done to understand if the decline in the relative power of aged men was related to the feminization of American culture during the post-revolutionary period. While being viewed as exemplary females would have been beneficiary for enhancing the social image of aged women, associating traditional feminine qualities with elderly men could have contributed to their decline in social status.

Observations and Conclusions:

A Final Note on the Status of Historical Gerontology

Where should historical scholarship fit into gerontological literature? It is important to reassert that the history of the study of old age is rooted in science. The earliest studies of old age and aging were meant to solve the problems of old age by

treating it as a disease that could be cured. Since the late nineteenth century, the discipline has taken a more humanistic approach as it explores the social context of aging. Sociologists argue that aging is not, and can never be, simply a biological phenomenon because each culture endows it with meaning. Social gerontologist emphasize that the cultural context in which people age produces diverse realities of what old age means to individuals.

Historians have only recently entered the scholarly debate about the meaning of old age. In the late 1970s, the field was slow to develop a clear framework of analysis and the delay has impeded its recognition as a valuable contributor to the contemporary debate. Related to this vague beginning is the perception that historical scholarship only provides interesting context and the obligatory paragraphs on "history" but does not have any real purpose in solving modern day problems.

Contributing to the problem of the acceptance of the historians' participation in scholarly debate is a dearth of theoretical foundation. It is clear from early historical studies, and the legacy they left behind, that the primary framework of analysis has been an emphasis on the rise and fall of public status. This perspective is intimately connected to the modernization theory that argues the elderly experienced decline in status with the advent of industrialization.[13] The problem with the modernization theory is that it only explains, and not very well, how society came to regard the elderly population as obsolete. Modernization theory does not offer solutions for the future. It is primarily a negative interpretation of the past that treats the elderly as a group with little attention to the impact of race, class, or gender. Modernization theory has been destabilized by

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[12] Achenbaum, 24.

historical case studies demonstrating inconsistencies in the macro historical approach and historians who emphasize there was no golden age in the history of aging.

Historical gerontology is a field still trying to find its place in its major discipline and among other fields dedicated to the study of old age and aging. Andrew Achenbaum suggests historians should play an active role in policy planning and analysis, but it is also appropriate for historians to contribute to an understanding of the essential meaning of aging. To comprehend the meaning of old age and aging historians must be willing to interpret it as a function of both social "reality" *and* cultural "imagery." In a recent literature review, David Troyansky declared that historical gerontology had finally been recognized as a valid field of inquiry by mainstream historians.[14] While it is clear that historical gerontology has made significant advances in broadening its understanding of aging in the past, it has not achieved broad recognition. To achieve a broader audience and wider recognition as a valuable contributor to both historical and contemporary discourses, there must be recognition of diversity in the experience of "the elderly" in the past.

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[13] Andrew Achenbaum, "Further Perspectives on Modernization and Aging: A Preview of the Historical Literature" in *Social Science History*, vol. 6 (Summer 1982), 347.
[14] David Troyansky, "Progress Report: The History of Old Age in the Wester World" *Ageing and Society* 16 (1996), 233.

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Vita:

SARAH E. TAYLOR

EDUCATION

M.A., History, May 2002
Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA
GPA: 4.0/4.0

B.S., History, May 2000
Minor, Business Administration
Radford University, Radford, VA
GPA: 4.0/4.0

A.A.& S., General Studies, May 1998
New River Community College
GPA: 4.0/4.0

EXPERIENCE

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA
Fall 2000- present

- Graded and monitored student progress
- Worked one-on-one with approximately thirty students on class research projects
- Presented lectures and guided class discussions in professor's absence

Research Assistant, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA

- Fall 2000-Fall 2001
- Transcribed Virginia Company of London records to include on the Virtual Jamestown database, an award-winning web site founded by Virginia Tech historian, Crandall Shifflett, and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities
- Collaborated with Professor Thomas Ewing in researching library and on-line materials about Soviet women and education

Museum Interpreter and Educator, Smithfield Plantation, Blacksburg, VA, Summer 1999 and 2000

- Conducted guided tours of late eighteenth-century home in period costume
- Taught one-week history summer camp to approximately ten children, ages six to twelve.
- Managed museum store

Museum Volunteer, Glencoe Museum, Radford, VA

- Spring 2000
- Assisted director with organizing museum displays
- Drafted informational pamphlet about Glencoe
- Catalogued new museum acquisitions

ACTIVITIES

Served as History Graduate Student Association's Conference Planning Co-Chair, Virginia Tech

- Fall 2001- Spring 2002
- Responsible for publicizing annual academic conference
- Drafted Call for Papers announcing conference
- Networked with members of history faculty, public relations coordinator for College of Arts and Sciences, and university media

Presented at History Graduate Student Conference, Virginia Tech

- April 6, 2002
- Organized and presented research about the reputation of elderly women in early America to an audience of approximately fifteen
- Answered questions about my topic from the moderator and audience

Organized Department of History's History Teaching Colloquium, Virginia Tech

- Fall 2001
- Scheduled speakers from within the university community to talk about teaching and learning history
- Responsible for publicizing meetings

Served as a judge at the annual History Day at Radford University

- Spring 2001, 2002
- Collaborated with Radford University history faculty to evaluate the historical merit of presentations by middle school students
- Interviewed students about their projects

HONORS and ASSOCIATIONS:

History Department Dean Scholar, Radford University, 1999-2000
Radford University Foundation Scholarship, 1999
Radford University Foundation Scholarship Award, 1998-2000
Phi Alpha Theta history honors society, 1999
Kappa Delta Pi education honors society, 1999
Pi Gamma Mu social science honors society, 2000

Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, 2000
The Southern Historical Association, 2000
Student Representative to GSA, Virginia Tech, 2000