The book cover features a vibrant red background with a teal-colored circle on the left side. A large black circle overlaps the teal circle and extends towards the center. The title is printed in white, serif, all-caps font, with the words 'BEYOND', 'IMAGE', and 'AND' stacked on the right side of the teal circle, and 'CONVENTION' spanning across the bottom of the teal circle and the black circle.

BEYOND  
IMAGE  
AND  
CONVENTION

EXPLORATIONS IN SOUTHERN  
WOMEN'S HISTORY

EDITED BY

Janet L. Coryell

Martha H. Swain

Sandra Gioia Treadway

Elizabeth Hayes Turner

BEYOND  
IMAGE  
AND  
CONVENTION



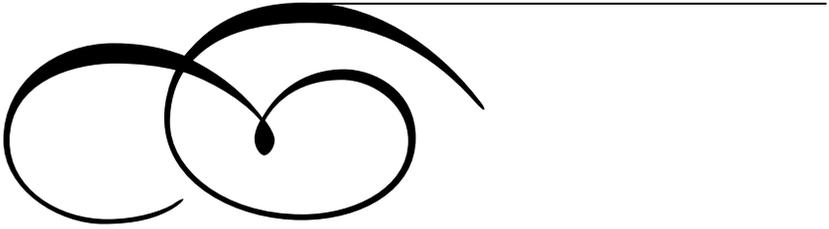
# Southern Women

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A series of books developed from the Southern Conference on Women's History sponsored by the Southern Association for Women Historians.

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edited by  
Virginia Bernhard  
Betty Brandon  
Elizabeth Fox-Genovese  
Theda Perdue



BEYOND  
IMAGE  
AND  
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*Explorations in Southern  
Women's History*

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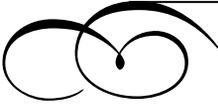
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DEDICATED TO WOMEN  
WHO SURVIVE LIFE CHANGES  
AND STRIVE TO CONTINUE  
AND SUCCEED



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BEYOND  
IMAGE  
AND  
CONVENTION



## Editors' Introduction

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"There is nothing in the whole world so unbecoming to a woman," wrote Oscar Wilde, "as a Nonconformist conscience." Conformity to standards of conventional feminine behavior, including passivity, agreeableness, and the acceptance of male dominance, hierarchy, and the conventions of the mainstream, has been used to define, control, and judge women through the centuries. Perhaps nowhere in American life has the importance of preserving the conventions been more firmly enshrined than in the American South. The image of the Southern Lady, promoted in pulpit and press in the last century, and personified in Technicolor by Melanie Wilkes in *Gone with the Wind*, has long been the norm by which southern women's lives were measured. The Southern Lady was genteel, self-controlled, and never went beyond her God-given, male-defined boundaries. Her behavior was not only impeccable, it was thoroughly and absolutely conventional.

But it was not reality. And with the advent of women's history and the publication of works on southern women (as opposed to ladies), the paragon of ladyhood began to tumble off her pedestal.<sup>1</sup>

1. Julia Cherry Spruill, *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938) gave the first push by pointing out the myriad activities in which southern women were engaged that went far beyond the image of ladyhood where ladies directed the slaves and did little else. Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) destroyed the mythic creature through modern scholarship. Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982) and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) led the vanguard for more radical interpretations. Now historians have widened the field considerably with works such as Kent Anderson Leslie, *Woman of Color, Daughter of Privilege: Amanda America Dickson, 1849–1893* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995);

Scholars today are more aware of those women whose lives could not be defined as conventional based on the old model. Two volumes of published essays, stemming from two earlier conferences on women's history sponsored by the Southern Association for Women Historians, advanced certain themes apparent in all women's history but especially applicable to the history of southern women. Essays based upon papers presented at the First Southern Conference on Women's History in 1988 at Converse College illuminated the "histories and identities" of women whose individual or collective experiences were little known. From the Second Southern Conference on Women's History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill held in 1991, a volume appeared that told the "hidden histories" of women in the New South era. Like its earlier companion, this second collection portrayed southern women in circumstances not usually described in mainline studies of the South.<sup>2</sup>

The following collection of essays is from the Third Southern Conference on Women's History, this one held at Rice University in June 1994. From the myriad papers delivered there, the editors have selected nine essays to develop the theme that southern women have gone "beyond convention" throughout time. Their failures to conform to expected standards of behavior have given historians unique opportunities to explore how southern women chose to contradict convention and to measure the degree of their rebellion. The essays presented here also show us how historians continue to go beyond convention in expanding the concept of what constitutes history. A new cadre of scholars has used previously untapped sources to craft provocative and exciting essays that range over more than three hundred years of southern history.

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Margaret Ripley Wolfe, *Daughters of Canaan: A Sage of Southern Women* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995); and Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). The list of historians working on southern women's history is immense and impressive.

2. Virginia Bernhard et al., eds., *Southern Women: Histories and Identities* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991); Virginia Bernhard et al., eds., *Hidden Histories of Women in the New South, Southern Women* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994).

The first three essays illustrate episodes in the lives of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century southern women who lived beyond the pale in their own time. Kirsten Fischer's description of white women's sexual misconduct in colonial North Carolina and Anya Jabour's account of a Virginia matron's vexatious white housekeepers suggest that women who were at the bottom of the social ladder had little to lose in defying convention, despite penalties for their obstreperous behavior and defiance of propriety.

Fischer documents a number of cases where renegade couples engaged in illicit sex, interracial relationships, skinny-dipping or other forms of "naked co-mingling." Some women overstepped the bounds of the law by operating "bawdy houses" or working as prostitutes. Although these outcasts were eventually caught and punished, usually by lashings or extended terms of servitude, Fischer finds in their defiance more than a manifestation of alternative social and sexual mores. She sees their aberrant behavior as a challenge to moral authorities and the conventional relations of gender, race, and class; this mischievous subculture defied political control by colonial North Carolina elites. Mining court records, Fischer has developed an aspect of the social history of a colonial underclass.<sup>3</sup>

On a smaller scale, the housekeepers of Elizabeth Wirt, of Richmond and Washington, also defied elite authority. Anya Jabour details the manner in which white housekeepers in the Wirt household set themselves apart from the slaves they were expected to supervise, while enduring restrictions and conditions that mimicked those of women bound in slavery. While Wirt was determined to command the lives and duties of her white servants, they were bent on resisting the ill-defined and incessant demands of a shrewish employer. The hierarchies of race and class did battle inside the home where, in Jabour's words, "the mixed-labor system of the urban upper South maximized the potential for confrontation over the issue of household status." This essay defines the domestics' hierarchy within the confines of a family whose mistress felt compelled to defend her own position

3. This approach is similar to Mary Beth Norton's in her history of the "gossipy women" of Maryland, "Gender and Defamation in Seventeenth-Century Maryland," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 44 (January 1987): 3-39.

of authority and superiority. In addition, analyses of architectural barriers, which appear both here and in subsequent essays, begin to suggest the importance of physical household structure in preserving class distinctions. Jabour's essay is also instructive for what it tells us about economic deprivation, which forced white women—widowed, abandoned, or never married—into domestic employment. Based extensively upon the William Wirt Papers, this study is further proof that the papers of prominent men are rich in family and women's history.

Cynthia Lynn Lyerly writes about episodes in the history of Methodism in four southern states. By focusing on the religious enthusiasm of women and the reaction to it, Lyerly delineates the intersection between race, emotional expression, and dementia. Male critics reacted to these episodes by declaring religiously rebellious women licentious, mad, or possessed. The real basis for opposition by male parishioners to what women proclaimed to be their "deep impression of religion" was a fear that women were trying to assume moral leadership within both church and community. As Lyerly argues, "gender was just as pivotal a factor as class in the contest for religious authority" in the years 1770 to 1810 and even afterward. Preachers and congregations learned early the basis for women's claim to authority and the right to share in church governance: their time, money, and labor were essential for the church's survival. Nonetheless, church fathers sought to deny women their expressions of religious fervor to diminish one of the "only avenues white southern women had to public moral authority and uncensored self-expression."

The enthusiasm of young Methodist women plays a role in Norma Taylor Mitchell's essay as well. Virginia Campbell, niece of David and Mary Campbell, a prominent Abingdon, Virginia, couple, was prompted by her Methodist faith to educate the extended slave family belonging to her aunt and uncle. Mitchell's focus, however, is not on Virginia but on one of the slaves, known only as Hannah, who lived in close quarters, literally, with her owners for almost forty years. Virginia's tutoring, the slaves' own Methodist teachings, and paternalistic treatment by the Campbells all combined to embolden Hannah and three generations of slaves living in this impressive household. Often away at Richmond, David Campbell instructed his slaves so that they could manage in his absence. Gradually, Hannah and her progeny

developed a degree of autonomy and power that surpassed that of the vast majority of bondsmen and women. Indeed, through long periods of Campbell family absences and illnesses, Hannah pushed so hard to win that autonomy for herself and her family that her master became anxious. After his death, Hannah did not live to see freedom, but, thanks to her, the skilled younger members of her family were better prepared than were most freedmen and women for their new lives after 1865.

Kimberly Shreck relates the sad account of a slave that differs greatly from Taylor's portrait of Hannah and her family. Life after emancipation was highly circumscribed for the unfortunate Eda Hickam of Cooper County, Missouri. Hickam argued before a state court in 1890 that she had never been told of emancipation and was thus due back pay for twenty-five years of unpaid service. From 1865 to 1889, she had lived in isolation, working as a domestic for the white Hickam family. In court her oppressors argued that she was "family," yet she was given no share of inheritance at her master's death. Shreck's examination of the case from both sides reveals the thin line that existed between slavery and freedom. It raises a question, likely to remain unanswered, about how many slaves, lacking kinship networks, lived in a state of virtual peonage. Hickam, even if freed, would have had few employment options other than domestic service. Although Eda Hickam's four trips to court availed her nothing in the end, her decision to bring suit, at a time when Cooper County was caught in the grip of virulent racism, was an act of bravery.

Best-selling author Mary Virginia Terhune, who wrote under the pseudonym Marion Harland, left her native Virginia when she married. She moved to New Jersey, where she lived in comfort and without distraction, writing in traditional genres: cookbooks, domestic manuals, and antebellum southern novels. She promulgated republican motherhood, respected prewar southern gender traditions, and never supported women's rights, yet she proved that a woman could have a highly profitable career outside her home and family. Conceding to the literary marketplace, she altered her views about the South, abandoned the Lost Cause, and chose not to pen propagandistic romances about errant Yankees and pious Confederates. Some of her works were plainly attacks on perceived flaws in southern culture, defying literary conventions set by other southern writers of her day.

Karen Manners Smith sees in Terhune's postbellum work an "eagerness to participate in the reconciliation process," though she herself remained "unreconstructed" in her attitudes about race. Although Terhune sought a literary breakaway from her contemporaries, she could never tear herself away completely from her southern past. Smith's serious consideration of this popular novelist exemplifies the continued need for historians of women to examine the lives and works of those writers whom literary critics might dismiss as "scribbling women," as Nathaniel Hawthorne did. Those "scribblers" tell us much about the social history of women readers in the nineteenth century.

The last group of essays in this volume describes ways in which southern women confronted white discrimination against blacks. Susan L. Smith examines the efforts of middle-class black women to set up public health programs to provide care for their citizens when their communities were neglected by both the federal government under New Deal programs and state public health departments. She examines a health project that Alpha Kappa Alpha operated in the Mississippi Delta from 1935 to 1942 as the epitome of both social welfare and political activism. Without grassroots black women's voluntary organizations, public health services would not have made it to the black community. As Smith demonstrates, "the story of black women's health activism helps to expand our understanding of the public political meaning of women's private volunteer work." Although AKA's leader Dorothy Boulding Ferebee promoted the project from her Washington office, two women on the scene were crucial to the Delta project's success. Ida Louise Jackson, a Mississippi-born AKA president, and Dr. Arenia C. Mallory, a Lexington, Mississippi, educator, were the driving forces behind creating the clinics and maintaining ongoing research on socioeconomic conditions among black sharecroppers who had long been neglected by the white power structure. Smith's essay shows that the "neighborhood union" work conducted in urban centers by black women activists had rural counterparts.

Sarah Patton Boyle first took her stand against segregation and discrimination in 1950 and thus preceded the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Boyle, a white, mainline, Virginia Episcopalian, considered her conversion to desegregation the only course any true Christian could take. In her essay, Joanna Bowen Gillespie provides

an explication of Boyle's book, *The Desegregated Heart* (1962), within the historical context of the times. This included the resistance by white Virginians to racial advancement and their retaliation against Boyle in the form of threats from the White Citizens' Council and a cross-burning by the Ku Klux Klan. Through extensive writing in secular magazines and church journals, Boyle fought against what she found to be the true religion, even among more liberal southern Episcopalians: a devotion to the nobility of the Southern Cause rather than to Christianity. In denouncing her church's paternalism toward the Negro, Boyle joined a small band of dissenters that included Lillian Smith and Virginia Durr. Gillespie terms Boyle's denouement of misguided church views "an earthquake." Always a "true Southern lady," she went beyond the conventions of her era in daring to challenge religion and church.

Marcia G. Synott writes of another white apostle of civil rights, Alice Norwood Spearman Wright. Rather than work for interracial understanding through the church, Spearman sought the support of South Carolina's white clubwomen and their allies to promote the cause of desegregation through interracial dialogue. In more effective ways, she worked as the executive secretary of the South Carolina Council on Human Relations from 1954 to 1967. Synott's portrait of Alice Spearman during these years reveals much about the position of white clubwomen on racial matters and the response of black leaders to her overtures. As a "bridge" between the generation of white women activists of the 1910s and 1920s and those of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Spearman is a worthy subject of this sensitively written essay. She is a useful example for those who contend that "Men Led, but Women Organized" the movement for racial justice in the South. Synott adds to the growing number of studies on women active at the grassroots level in the civil rights movement—studies that have changed the history of the movement in significant ways.

There are discernible gaps in this collection, as should be admitted for any volume of only nine essays. Readers are invited to return to the two earlier publications from the Southern Conferences on Women's History to find accounts of individuals, organizations, and topics that complement those here. In earlier collections more twentieth-century studies describe the intersection of race and gender from the Progressive Era to at least 1940. The women's club movement