

Interview with Rosie Zagarri (Professor, George Mason University) Probate Record for Sarah Green (1759)

1. Introduction (1:02)

When a person died in the 18th century, it was necessary for the government to figure out what they owned so that the items could be passed on to the appropriate heirs and all the people who were owed money, the creditors.

This was a society that was run on credit—bookkeeping credit and debts. So it was very likely at any given time that any one person had loaned money or goods to someone and was owed money or goods. The creditors would have to be paid off, and only then could the heirs receive what was owed to them.

The county court would appoint some officials who would go to the person's home and make a list of what was in each room and assign a valuation to it and submit it to the court.

I think there was a lot of subjectivity because you were judging the condition of things, the quality of goods. You were judging their market value.

2. House Overview (0:35)

The fact that some of these are organized by rooms gives you more insight into the way ordinary life was lived in this distant time.

What was kept in different rooms? For example, if they had a spinning wheel, where did they keep it? Did they keep it in their bedroom? Did they keep it in the hall? Did they keep it in a parlor? Did they keep it in the kitchen? If they had books, where did they keep those?

In some houses, you might have people sleeping in the same room that they were cooking. Or you would have five or six people sleeping in the same bedroom. You would have a kitchen, but it would be detached from the rest of the house.

3. Reading Strategies (2:04)

First of all, you look at the relative values of the items and you look at the kinds of materials that they're made of. You look at where they're placed in the house. Those pieces of information give you a place to start in determining what's going on in this document.

There is one reference book that could be very useful when you look at a probate record and that's the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the historical evolution of words throughout time.

I saw in the chamber, a bedroom, “1 Bed Teaster.” So I thought, what is that, a “teaster.” So I went to the *OED* and it was actually listed under “tester,” but the alternative spelling was “teaster.” What it is is a canopy over a bed frame. So she had a canopy bed and I found that just by looking in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

One of the most difficult issues is how much money is this. Is this a lot of money? Is this a little money? If you notice in the last paragraph, it says “Pursuant to an Order of York Court dated 20th June 1757 the Subscribers having been first Sworn before a Justice of the Peace have appraised in Current Money the Slaves and Personal Estate of Sarah Green.” Current money means as money is currently valued in Virginia. But what’s the relationship between the valuation in Virginia money and the value of money in England per se? That’s hard to determine.

A lot of this stuff you could only determine relatively, by looking at other wills and inventories. Or reading a secondary source that tells you a wealthy person has an estate worth this much, a poor person this much.

The better materials then are the better materials now, like mahogany or silk or silver. There are a lot of things that you can figure out just by looking at it. So I think a person without knowledge of the 18th century can find out what some of these specific items refer to.

4. Historical Context (0:42)

York County is an older county, settled in 1634 on the east coast of Virginia. This inventory was ordered on June 20th, 1757, so that was during the French and Indian War. There would be a lot upheaval going on in other parts of the North American British colonies; there wasn’t a lot of fighting in Virginia at this point. Still, Virginia was facing the threat of Indians, the threat of French attacks on its frontier.

In York County, Sarah Green would have been shielded from those attacks. She was far from the frontier, but she probably would’ve been asked to pay higher taxes for the support of the French & Indian War.

5. Women and Property Ownership (1:20)

Sarah Green, June 20th, 1757, in York County, Virginia. So it’s a woman and that fact in and of itself is significant because most probate records from this time would be from men.

The only women who would show up in these probate records would most likely be widows because married women could not own property of their own. That’s a traditional English law called coverture that was transplanted to all of the North American British colonies. The idea is that the husband and wife form a single economic unit. Once a woman gets married, she’s under the guardianship of her husband and she no longer has the right to own property or to sue or be

sued in court. Or to make contracts or to own land. She can own a small number of personal goods, but she can't own substantial personal property or real property.

If her husband died, though, then she gained some independence and she could act like a male property owner. She could sue or be sued in court, make contracts, own the property.

6. Determining Wealth (1:54)

I notice a lot of fine goods, expensive goods. There's a silver teapot, silver teaspoons. There's a looking glass. Looking glasses were expensive and hard to come by.

Glass was imported by and large. Silks were imported. Spices were imported. Generally speaking, the more of these imported goods there are in a home, the more likely that the family, the person, was of a higher social status. The fewer of those goods, the less well-off.

Other things that indicate her status—a leather-bottomed walnut chair. A lot of different pictures. Pictures were not common. There's a picture of the seasons. Twelve of those pictures are valued at 4 pounds 16. "Maps of the World," "2 very old Pictures," a "Historical picture of Rachel & Leah," the biblical sisters. Those were probably imported because there weren't too many local artists at the time making or painting pictures. So that also suggests wealth.

A lot of the items are referred to as "old" or "very old." So, you have an "old black table." You have "10 pairs of sheets very old," "9 Table Cloths very old," "2 old Tables," "1 large Kettle very old."

It seems to me that Sarah Green was a widow. A widow whose husband had died many years before. Whose husband had been very successful and here she was living into her old age with all these signs of her former wealth around her: her ivory knives and forks, her china cups, her silk quilt, her damask napkins, mahogany tea boards, old books, leather chairs. All of these signs of wealth.

It's important to remember that the slaves' reproduction created new wealth for her.

7. Slavery in Virginia (1:28)

The biggest proportion of her estate is made up of the value of the slaves. There's Bridget who's valued at 30 pounds; Sarah, a girl, valued at 30 pounds; Sam, a boy, worth 40 pounds. And notice right there, that a boy slave is worth more than a girl slave, presumably because he could work in the fields, the tobacco fields. A girl slave could work in the tobacco fields, but she would be more likely to be a domestic or to take care of children or perhaps not to be able to work as hard in the fields as a male slave.

Lambert, a slave, 50 pounds; London, a slave, 50 pounds; and Robin, that's presumably a male as

well, worth 50 pounds. What that tells you is that a lot of the wealth of Virginians, wealthy Virginians, at this time was made up of human property.

Look at how much a slave is valued at compared with a desk and bookcase. Even the cheapest slave is worth 30 pounds and the desk and bookcase are worth 5 pounds. The silver teapot is worth 20 pounds. That's the most valuable item on this inventory besides the slaves and that's still worth less than any of the individual slaves. So that shows you something about how valuable slaves were, how central they were to the economy and to the production of wealth in the Virginia economy.

8. Owning Slaves (1:22)

The fact that she had six slaves suggests that she didn't have a large plantation, but that doesn't mean her husband didn't have a large plantation. When a husband died, by law, a woman was entitled to the "widow thirds," her dower share. Either Sarah Green is just the recipient of a small portion of her husband's estate and slaves, or else he was a small prosperous farmer who made his wealth from perhaps selling goods, being a merchant or trader. Slaves were one of the few kinds of property that were often inherited by women. Land usually went to the male heirs.

A large number of slaves in colonial Virginia lived on small farms rather than on large plantations. It wasn't uncommon for a person to own only one or two slaves. It's interesting, though, that she had at least two young slaves, Sarah, a girl, and Sam, a boy. Does that mean then that Bridget and one of the male slaves were married and these were their children perhaps?

If she didn't have land of her own for them to farm, then she would profit from their labor by hiring them out. She probably hired the women out as domestics and she lived off the income because labor continued to be in short supply in colonial Virginia.

9. Debts Owed (0:47)

A lot of people in Colonial Virginia both owed debts and had debts owed to them. Sarah Green or her husband may well have put up the money for Nicholas Water to buy land or property and so he was paying her back for this loan. This was what he owed and this was the interest—215 pounds was the mortgage and 11 pounds 10 for two years of interest. So that would be considered part of the estate.

And that was one of the problems in colonial Virginia—all debts were due when the person died. So unless you could re-negotiate with the new owners of the debt, then you had to repay it at the time the estate was probated. So poor Nicholas Water had to repay his mortgage.

10. Unusual Items (1:13)

There're three old maps of the world. That suggests a curiosity about the larger world, an

interest in history, in geography that was very common for the 18th century Enlightenment period. But to have it in colonial Virginia when society was still pretty rudimentary suggests a deeper interest in learning than most ordinary people would have.

The other item that's interesting here is an old chair and a harness. Again, the fact that it's old is significant and it hasn't been replaced recently. But this would be what you connect up to a horse and you would ride around in. And a woman, in particular, would be interested in having a chair and harness so she wouldn't ride on the horse itself. So maybe she traveled around a bit in the countryside.

Historians have found that in colonial Virginia, the majority of people in the mid 18th century never left their community for the entire course of their lives. It was rare for a person to travel much farther than within a five-mile radius. So the fact that she had a chair and harness does suggest perhaps a curiosity or an ability to go to a larger outside world—to Williamsburg, maybe, or to other places in the colony.

11. Daily Life (1:42)

Books and a bookcase and a desk suggests a level of literacy and interest in learning. Someone in the family was very interested in book learning.

Either Sarah Green's husband or Sarah Green herself could read. In colonial Virginia, while literacy was not rare, it was not nearly as common as in New England. So either Sarah Green was a literate woman or more likely, her husband could read.

I don't see any Bible listed, and maybe someone in the family took it. I would find it interesting if they didn't have a Bible because that was the most common book that people kept in their houses.

She does have a lot of the typical stuff in a kitchen, but I would imagine that because she had female slaves, she didn't use the washing tubs herself. She didn't necessarily use the pestle and mortar herself. She might supervise the slaves in making the food, in washing the clothes.

By the mid 18th century, there was a lot of imitation of English tea drinking rituals. So if you could, you would import fancy silver goods, tea kettles, teaspoons. Tea drinking really was the center of social ritual at the time. Especially the women would gather together and make a big ceremony of brewing a certain kind of tea and pouring the tea and socializing and gossiping and eating little teacakes. It was all a big way to both demonstrate your social status and connect with other members of your community.

By the time of the American Revolution, drinking tea was so widespread that when Britain put a tax on tea, it was a great cause of alarm and outrage in the colonies.

12. Missing Information (0:58)

There were some goods that the heirs were allowed to remove from the property after the death of the person. This inventory was ordered on June 20th, 1757, and it wasn't actually taken until April 1759, and entered May 21st, 1759. So that's two years. And in that interim, the heirs were allowed to take certain goods, personal goods of the person who died. The clothes were likely taken away, small trinkets. Jewelry may have been taken.

There wasn't very much cash in colonial Virginia. The most common coin was the Spanish piece of 8. And it was very hard to come by gold and silver, by hard money. In Virginia, too, you often had promissory notes for tobacco crops. But it looks like that wasn't part of this particular estate.

I did expect to see more in terms of spinning equipment or weaving equipment—typical woman's work.

13. Learn More (1:47)

You could see if there is a will for Sarah Green. You could look up any other Greens in York County for the period. I would go backward in time from the date of her death, from 1757, and see when her husband died and see what his will said, if he had one.

You could look up what land they owned. A lot of the county courts have other kinds of records like depositions and court suits and you can look up and see if there're any legal suits involving Sarah Green or any other people whose last name is Green.

It's hard to determine for sure if all the Greens are the same family, but a lot of times just by reading those records you can figure out if they're related. So, I think the first thing would be to try and figure out what her husband's name was and then I'd try to figure out if she had other family members—children, brothers, sisters.

There aren't good marriage records for a lot of colonial Virginia. Particular parishes might have them, but that's really hit and miss. They weren't kept by the state at that time. So one of the problems in dealing with women in these records is that you often don't have their maiden name, so you're really tied to understanding them through their husbands.

If there was any question about how she died, there would be an inquest. There could be court proceedings, criminal proceedings.

Contesting wills was very common. So after 1759, after this inventory was submitted and the will was probated, if there was a will, other creditors might come forward, other heirs might come forward. So there could be a legal trail subsequent to this inventory and a lot of those records are available on microfilm. Once you have a person, a name, it's often easier to trace what happens before and after.