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Separate Spheres in a Separate World: African-Nova Scotian Women in late-19th-Century Halifax County

AS A VISIBLE MINORITY in a dominantly Euro-American environment, African-Nova Scotian women in the last quarter of the 19th century were conspicuous both as women and as racially different. In photographs, sketches and literary writings we can catch glimpses of black women at the Halifax city market. Court records and newspaper accounts expose “colored” women among the city’s numerous prostitutes. The public nature of these particular activities distorts the diversity of the female African-Nova Scotian experience, and their high visibility to contemporaries is contrasted to their invisibility in the way that the past has been presented.¹

The obvious public presence of African-Nova Scotian women around Halifax county and in the city streets also conflicts with predominant images of women in the 19th century. The Euro-American middle-class obsession with categorization placed women in the home and men in the workplace. This division of space, referred to as the idea of separate spheres, was supported by a host of gender-related characteristics. To some extent, this framework reflected the division of labour in society, but the ideology and values associated with it extended beyond task performance. Of course, men and women did not actually live in separate spaces, but it is impossible to deny some kind of division between public and private existed. Men and women shared both a domestic and public life, and the

1 I have consciously chosen to use African-Nova Scotian in this text to emphasize the historic presence of people who shared some form of African descent in Nova Scotia. I use African — in the same way that other groups of “hyphenated Canadians” are identified — with the understanding that the Nova Scotia Black community did not originate in a single geographic location in Africa and that their historic identity was further shaped by the United States or the Caribbean. In the context of this study the contemporary term to describe African-Nova Scotians was colored. This essay is not Afro-centric in its outlook as it investigates the effect of a dominant Euro-Nova Scotian cultural ideology on this community and generally overlooks what may have been more important issues for the Black community such as economic survival, racism, and the impact of family separation with high levels of outmigration. As the author I should acknowledge that I am not of this community but have undertaken this research as part of my continuing interest in historical social relations in the province. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of a SSHRC post-doctoral fellowship and the comments of Judith Fingard, the Toronto Gender History Group and my former colleagues at Queen’s University.

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idea of separate spheres was less about the physical reality than about the way that society was thought to be ordered.

African-Nova Scotian women lived in a bicultural world with two distinct historical communities shaping their identities. Evidence of the tenacity of the culture of the African diaspora was suggested by women's central participation in trade, their flamboyant taste in dress, and their skills in the art of herbal healing.² While folklorist Arthur Huff Fauset concluded during Nova Scotia fieldwork in the 1930s that the "pressure of western culture" had led to the loss of traditional stories, he also noted the retention of special religious customs and dialect.³ In 19th-century Halifax County, some African-Nova Scotian women continued African traditions through activities such as making baskets, carrying them on their heads and drawing upon an extensive oral tradition of pharmacopoeia.⁴ Women managed to combine the culture of the African diaspora, which included economic independence and relative sexual autonomy, with aspects of the Euro-American gender conventions such as the ideology of separate spheres.⁵

American research has suggested that while African-Americans maintained transatlantic traditions, they were strongly influenced by 19th-century Euro-American bourgeois gender conventions. Historians such as Jacqueline Jones, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, James Horton and Sharon Harley have argued that separate spheres ideology offered self-respect and protection to a group of women particularly vulnerable to economic exploitation and sexual harassment and assault in the public sphere. Elevating domestic culture made a great deal of sense in a hostile world. Women's low status as wage-earners encouraged them to adopt as

- 2 Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "Beyond the Sound of Silence: Afro-American Women in History", *Gender and History*, 1, 1 (Spring 1989), p. 56; William D. Piersen, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Amherst, MA, 1988), pp. 101-2, 84, 103.
- 3 Arthur Huff Fauset, *Folklore from Nova Scotia* [*Memoirs of the American Folklore Society*, Vol. XXIV (New York, 1931)], p. viii.
- 4 Peter H. Wood, "'It was a Negro Taught Them': A New Look at African Labor in Early South Carolina", *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, IX, 3&4 (July and April 1974), pp. 160-79. Many of the Black Loyalists came from South Carolina.: James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870* (London, 1976), p. 5.
- 5 Linda Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History", *Journal of American History*, 75, 1 (June 1988), p. 26. One of the most interesting ways to examine the gender conventions of the first-wave of African-Nova Scotian immigrants, the Loyalists, is to look at those who left for Sierra Leone in the 1790s. Africanists have noted that these Nova Scotian women differed greatly from Africans who lacked any experience in North America and from their fellow settlers, the Maroons. In particular, Nova Scotian women were noted for their economic autonomy and their relative sexual independence. Almost all first generation Nova Scotian women in Freetown possessed an occupation and nearly one-third of the households were headed by women. By the mid-19th century, there was at least the appearance of economic dependence among Nova Scotian women in Sierra Leone that paralleled their female kin who remained in Nova Scotia. See E. Frances White, *Sierra Leone's Settler Women Traders* (Ann Arbor, 1987); Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 143, 101, 102.

their central identity their domestic and family roles as wives, mothers and sisters.⁶ The conceptual framework of separate spheres offers insight into the experience of African-Nova Scotian women by demonstrating both the constraint and the empowerment it offered. Separate spheres ideology did not reflect the physical or material reality of their lives, nor was it the only ideology shaping their identity. Racism and sexism, however, meant that separate spheres ideology afforded women both limitations and protection. Halifax County was selected as the focus for this study because of the large concentration of African-Nova Scotians both in the city and in surrounding rural communities such as Preston, Hammonds Plains and Beech Hill, also known as Beechville.

Blacks came to Nova Scotia with European settlement as slaves, both as Loyalists and Loyalist property after 1783, as refugees during the War of 1812, and throughout the 19th century as West Indian immigrants connected by the North Atlantic economy. Many households in Halifax County originally settled on poor agricultural land around Preston and Hammonds Plains and found that subsistence farming was possible only when household production was supplemented with the day-labour wages available in the city. Rural communities continued to be important, but households and individuals attracted by wage-labour moved into the city of Halifax, concentrating themselves in the working-class Ward Five along Creighton, Maynard and Gottingen Streets or the peri-urban Ward Six community known as Africville. Urban migration rarely solved economic problems and many African-Nova Scotian men and women were among the thousands of Maritimers who left the region for better opportunities in the Boston states or Central Canada. Sources make numbers difficult to determine and the census was highly unreliable; however, in 1881 there were 1,039 Nova Scotians of African descent listed as living in the city and another 1,485 in the county and Dartmouth, for 2,524 people in the county's total population of 67,981.⁷

Research on African-Nova Scotians in the 19th century is generally hampered by the paucity of reliable sources. Descriptions by Nova Scotians of European descent are marked by racism and by a disregard that extended to government records such as the decimal census. African-Nova Scotians were seriously under-enumerated in the census and their entries marked by a high degree of inaccuracy. For example, an examination of black women buried in the Halifax Camp Hill cemetery between 1871 and 1873 and between 1879 and 1890 revealed that less than half the of 86 women interred could be matched with either the 1871 or 1881 census.⁸ Sources authored by the black community are rare and generally

6 Higginbotham, "Beyond the Sound", pp. 56, 59; James Oliver Horton, "Freedom's Yoke: Gender Conventions Among Antebellum Free Blacks", *Feminist Studies*, 12, 1 (Spring 1986), p. 58; Sharon Harley, "For the Good of Family and Race: Gender, Work and Domestic Roles in the Black Community, 1880-1930", *Signs*, 15, 2 (Winter 1990), pp. 337, 347.

7 Canada, *Census of 1871*, Vol. 1, *Census—1881*, Vol. 1, In 1871 the population of the city was 29,582 and the county 37,008. This included 893 African-Nova Scotians in the city and 1,295 in the county and Dartmouth. By 1881 the city was more populous than the largely rural county, with the city listing 36,054 inhabitants and the county and Dartmouth only 31,863. The total population (city and county) increased by only 1,327 inhabitants, which included an increase of 336 African-Nova Scotians. Urbanization may have affected black Nova Scotians differently as the rural/urban percentage remained virtually unchanged.

8 PANS, Micro: Halifax, Cemeteries, Camp Hill (reel 10). Unfortunately, the 1891 census did not record race. The extent to which African-Nova Scotians were responsible for misinformation in the census is problematic. Enumerators were instructed that "Origin is to be scrupulously entered, as given by the

Table One
African-Nova Scotian Population
Halifax County, 1871 and 1881

	Total Population		African-Nova-Scotian Population		Per cent of Total Population		African-Nova-Scotian Women Over Age 12	
	1871	1881	1871	1881	1871	1881	1871	1881
Ward One	6634	7998	44	36	0.7	0.5	26	20
Ward Two	3320	3598	100	24	3.0	0.7	46	17
Ward Three	3277	2801	149	77	4.5	2.7	64	32
Ward Four	2331	1942	115	91	4.9	4.7	51	46
Ward Five	10046	13545	414	691	4.1	5.1	188	322
Ward Six	3974	6170	71	120	1.8	1.9	24	44
Total Halifax	29582	36054	893	1039			399	481
Beech Hill	407	438	66	61	16.2	13.9	23	26
Hammonds Plains	740	785	319	355	43.1	45.2	102	118
Dartmouth	4358	5673	172	252	3.9	4.4	58	81
Windsor Road	850	965	102	112	12.0	11.6	34	39
Truro Road	998	903	93	98	9.3	0.9	26	36
Preston	715	794	516	594	72.2	74.8	186	218
Other	19313	22369	27	13	0.1	>0.1	5	7
Total	56963	67981	2188	2524	3.8	3.7	833	1006

Source: Canada, *Census of 1871*, Vol. 1, Table III, "Origins of People", pp. 326-8; Canada, *Census — 1881*, Vol. 1, Table III, "Origin of the People", p. 212, and Census manuscripts [microfilm], 1871 and 1881, "Nominal Return of the Living".

restricted to church conventions and petitions.⁹ The prominence of Peter McKerrow as historian and secretary of the African Baptist Association and family member of the household that most frequently appeared in legal sources may also distort any

person questioned": Canada, *Census of 1881 Manual*, p. 30. Judith Fingard has noted that black community leaders Peter McKerrow and his brother-in-law William B. Thomas were not recorded as African in the 1881 census. On the other hand, in this same household, other entries appeared twice. Inez and Rachel Thomas were listed both at their mother's home in Preston (120-128) and in Ward 2 (145-255) of the city, living with their brother's and sister's families. I suspect other cases of duplication among young women engaged in domestic service listed at both the family's and employer's residence. See Judith Fingard, "Race and Respectability in Victorian Halifax", *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 20, 2 (May 1992), p. 179.

9 Frank Stanley Boyd, ed., Peter E. McKerrow, *Brief History of the Colored Baptists of NS, 1783-1895* ([1895] Halifax, 1976). The opinions of Peter McKerrow are disproportionately prominent as he was also secretary of the African Baptist Church and the major defendant in the only civil court case I uncovered involving African-Nova Scotian women. As the son-in-law of Rev. James Thomas, Peter McKerrow was closely connected to one of the few African-Nova Scotian families who dominate recorded historical sources.

insights. It is impossible to separate McKerrow's personal values of respectability and appropriate behaviour from more widely-held attitudes. The absence of diaries, letters or even records of women's organizations means that we can know something about the material conditions of women's lives, but not their self-perceptions and attitudes. On the rare opportunities when we can see them, we are able only to observe their actions, never fully understand their motivations.¹⁰

While Nova Scotia was a racist society in the 19th century, the circumstances were very different from those in the United States. Slavery, although important, was never widely practised. Furthermore, unlike the urban free blacks of the north, more than half the African-Nova Scotian population lived in rural areas where they were property owners, albeit of often very poor land. Wage-labour, therefore, was not as vital to community survival as it was often mixed with subsistence agriculture or household-based manufacturing. Nor was the labour of African-Nova Scotian women in any particular demand. High levels of outmigration across Nova Scotian society suggest a surplus of local labour. In the case of African-Nova Scotian women, this meant that they competed for positions in domestic service with urban and rural women of Euro-American descent.

With this difficulty in documentation, and the racial bias of most historians, research so far has produced relatively little insight into the 19th-century African-Nova Scotia community and, with the important exceptions of work by Judith Fingard and Sylvia Hamilton, even less specifically on women.¹¹

- 10 The paucity of sources has recently become further complicated by an appalling act of vandalism at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia. During the summer of 1990 someone stole the index cards relating to African-Nova Scotians and women. This act of vandalism placed another obstacle in the way of research on African-Nova Scotians' past. Yet so much needs to be done. This study introduces the experience of African-Nova Scotian women and reveals the need to follow up with research on residual African traditions, family structure, urban-rural movement, out-migration and female church organizations in the early 20th century. As Judith Fingard has demonstrated with court records, school records, cemetery records and detailed newspaper work promise more insight into African-Nova Scotian history. Understanding the way that race worked together with class and gender in shaping experience will not only offer knowledge of the African-Nova Scotian past, but will also lead to a better understanding of all Nova Scotian society.
- 11 Fannie Allison *et al.*, *Traditional Lifetime Stories: A Collection of Black Memories*, Vol. 2 (Westphal, N.S., 1990); Belle Barnes *et al.*, *Traditional Lifetime Stories: A Collection of Black Memories* Vol. I (Westphal, N.S., 1987); Donald H. Clairmont and Dennis William Magill, *Africville: The Life and Death of a Canadian Black Community* (Toronto, 1974); Judith Fingard, *The Dark Side of Victorian Halifax* (Lawrencetown, 1989); Fingard, "Race and Respectability"; Sylvia Hamilton, "Our Mothers Grand and Great: Black Women of Nova Scotia", *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme canadienne*, 4, 2 (Winter 1982), pp. 33-7; "A Glimpse of Edith Clayton", *Fireweed* 18 (Winter/Spring 1984), pp. 18-20; and Marie Hamilton, "Mothers and Daughters: A Delicate Partnership", *Fireweed*, 18 (Winter/Spring 1984), pp. 64-8; Bonnie Huskins, "Race and the Victorian City: Blacks and Indians During Celebrations in Saint John and Halifax, 1838-1887", Paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association, Victoria, B.C., 1990; Frances Henry, *Forgotten Canadians: The Blacks of Nova Scotia* (Don Mills, 1973); J.A. Mannette, "Stark Remnant of Blackpast: Thinking of Gender, Ethnicity and Class in 1780s Nova Scotia", *Alternative Routes*, 7 (1984); Bridglal Pachai, *Blacks of the Maritimes* (Tantallon, N.S., 1987); *Beneath the Clouds of the Promised Land: The Survival of Nova Scotia's Blacks, Vol. 1: 1600-1800* (Halifax, 1987); *Beneath the Clouds of the Promised Land: The*

Assumptions made about the historical experiences of women have been a mix of current cultural stereotypes and imported models from American history. For example, in a published 1985 lecture James W. St. G. Walker pointed to the common stereotype that the local community had been dominated by women, who were often responsible for “family discipline, household management and even the breadwinning”.¹² In an interesting construction of race and gender identity, Walker claimed that there were “more female” jobs available for black women than “black” jobs for the black man.¹³ The differentiation between “black” — read male — and “female” immediately alerts us to the acceptance of a preconceived norm in which women were not supposed to be directly involved in breadwinning. This view of the past had also been reflected in the research conducted by Frances Henry in 1969 when she made the remarkable claim that dated women’s paid labour outside the home as “a fairly recent phenomenon in the community”.¹⁴ Henry believed that the transformation from a subsistence to a consumer economy forced women out of the home and into the labour market to supplement the low wages available to African-Nova Scotian men. Like Walker’s implicit categorization of “black” jobs and “female” jobs, Henry presumed the existence of a time when subsistence production could support a household without the need for supplemental wages or perhaps even the public economic activities of women. In this view wage-earning women outside the home were an exception to the normal gendered division of labour. Henry’s identification of a well-defined sexual division of labour in which “it was generally felt the woman’s place was in the home” may have been more recent than she had imagined.

The inconsistency between prevalent expectations and lived experience was further complicated by the fact that the experience of African-Nova Scotian women in late-19th-century Halifax County was by no means homogeneous. Divisions existed based on class, rural or urban residency, religion, ethnicity and more abstract criteria such as the value placed on respectability. Different waves of immigration may have carried with them distinct gender conventions. While these divisions were real, the racist nature of this society meant that these internal divisions were not perceived by the dominant Euro-American culture. The puritanical women who silently stare at us through studio photographs differed greatly from the lively market women in their multi-layered petticoats and pipes. But as late as the 1920s, a white woman in Halifax looking for help with her

Survival of Nova Scotia’s Blacks, Vol. 2: 1800-1989 (Halifax, 1990); Calvin W. Ruck, *The Black Battalion, 1916-1920: Canada’s Best Kept Military Secret* (Hantsport, N.S., 1987); Carolyn Thomas, “The Black Church and the Black Women”, in Bridglal Pachai, ed., *Canadian Black Studies* (Halifax, 1979), pp. 234-8; James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Identity in Nova Scotia: Community and Institutions in Historical Perspective* (Westphal, 1985), Robin Winks, *Blacks in Canada* (New Haven, Conn., 1971).

12 Walker, *Black Identity*, p. 2.

13 Walker, *Black Identity*, p. 11.

14 Henry, *Forgotten Canadians*, p. 57. She was evidently referring to married women.

laundry felt free to stop any African-Nova Scotian woman on the street and request “where she could get a good girl”.¹⁵

The example of being approached on the street not only illustrates the racist assumptions of this white woman but also her assumptions about class. Most African-Nova Scotian households in Halifax and in the county were working class and as a result many black women shared aspects of the lives, and sometimes their actual residence with, white working-class women. But racism in fact reinforced class and, unlike their white counterparts, African-Nova Scotian women had virtually no legal wage-earning opportunities outside domestic service, taking in laundry, or sewing. Regardless of status in the community, property holdings or occupation of the husband, married women and widows charred, and young women were servants. Certainly there must have been a considerable variety of conditions under these labels. Unpredictable and irregular general day-work differed from regular weekly clients. Young women who lived in service in other African-Nova Scotian households may have had a dissimilar experience than their sisters and cousins who worked for white families. Indeed, one African-Nova Scotian household in Ward 5 kept a servant in 1881, even though their own daughter worked as a servant elsewhere. It is nearly impossible to understand class solely in terms of occupation as the few occupations reported offer no insight into hierarchy or power within the community. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has noted that racism and limited occupations among African-Americans “skewed income and occupational levels so drastically” that social scientists have measured adherence to bourgeois conventions, including gender relations, “as additional criteria for discerning blacks who maintained or aspired to middle-class status from those who practised alternative lifestyles”.¹⁶ Racism and sexism and the resulting limited employment opportunities open to African-Nova Scotia women obscured the level of real difference within the community.

Paid work usually related to a woman’s life course. Young women before marriage and widows without access to a male wage were the women most likely to work. Waged-work outside the home for married women may have been more common within the black community, but this was not necessarily reflected in the census. As the census undoubtedly missed many black women, it also missed many women’s occupations, particularly when a man’s occupation was provided. Relatively few married women were listed in the 1871 and 1881 censuses as engaging in paid labour; but these included schoolteacher Caroline Byers, dressmakers Mary Howell and Elizabeth Brown, and three shopkeepers, Isabel Dixon, Margaret Gleen and Catherine Gideon — whose husbands were employed in migratory occupations as seamen or ship stewards. The virtual absence of female farmers in the 1871 census conceals much agricultural work, but specifically the source of agricultural production in the many rural female-headed households. Married women who undertook occasional or casual day labour as charwomen

15 *The Worker* (Toronto), 15 November 1924.

16 Higginbotham, “Beyond the Sound”, p. 58.

Table Two
African-Nova Scotian Female Occupations
in Halifax County, 1871 and 1881

Occupations	Halifax		Dartmouth and Rural		Total	
	1871	1881	1871	1881	1871	1881
Servant	55	80	9	45	64	125
Butler		2				2
Cook		5				5
Housekeeper		1	4	1	4	2
Pastry Cook		1				1
Charwoman	5	57	1		6	57
General Work	2				2	
Housecleaner	1				1	
Washing	27	5	4		31	5
Dressmaker	2	10	2		4	10
Basketmaker				1		1
Grocer	2				2	
Confectioner	1	1			1	1
Shopkeeper		4				4
School Teacher	1	1	2		3	1
Private Tutor	1				1	
Clerk		1		2		3
Farmer		-	1	12	1	12
Collector		1				1
Hairdresser		1				1
Illegible		1				1
Total	97	171	23	61	120	232

Source: Canada, Census manuscripts [microfilm], 1871 and 1881, "Nominal Return of the Living".

were also severely under-represented in the 1871 census, which listed only eight women. This number increased to 53 in 1881 (see Table Two). The under-representation of this form of casual employment was significant. Was casual day-labour for black women so common that no mention of it was thought necessary? Many other occupations were also missed in the census. Both Mary Ann Reid Gigi and Sarah Anderson of Hammonds Plains had no occupation listed in the census yet both worked regularly as midwives.¹⁷ Other medical and pharmaceutical

17 Pachai, *Beneath the Clouds*, Vol. II, p. 104; Viola Parsons, *My Grandmother's Days* (Hantsport, 1988), p. 18.

skills widely held by women also went unacknowledged. Louisa Bailey's 1891 occupation as a herbalist would have been impossible to discern without independent consultation from city directories.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, illegal occupations such as brothel keeping, prostitution and bootlegging were absent, but these illicit occupations formed only a small part of the informal or hidden economy operating in the city and county. Residents of Halifax would have regularly seen African-Nova Scotian women at work in the informal economy, visible in public view at the Halifax market in the city's downtown. It was the perception of census enumerators that obscured the important public but informal roles women played in the economy, whether this be as vendors, boarding house operators, charwomen or midwives.

The under-representation of African-Nova Scotian women's public work was characteristic of all working-class women. While African-Nova Scotian women and working-class women of European descent shared the lowest-paid jobs, employment for black women may have been particularly difficult to acquire and vulnerable to loss. In the limited strata of "female" jobs, African-Nova Scotians did not work in factories, and only in shops if they were family operations. The number of rural and urban Euro-American women available for domestic work meant that black women were not in specific demand as servants. Analysis of the placements of African-Nova Scotian women in Halifax households reveals that although Ward One had nearly four times the number of domestic servants as any other ward, only 11 were of African descent. Conversely, Ward Five, where households were least likely to include domestic servants and had the highest ratio of domestic servants to the general population, named 53 female black servants.¹⁹

African-Nova Scotians may have had difficulty acquiring positions as servants as they were disproportionately absent from the city's best residential area and over-represented in the worst area. If acquiring a position as a servant was difficult, other occupations were more blatantly blocked. Even the pretence of upward mobility was not available. Racial discrimination meant that young black women were prohibited from being trained as nurses or entering the Provincial Normal School at Truro to prepare for a teaching career.²⁰ Although prohibited from professional qualifications, as early as 1874 a number of local black women undertook teaching under the provision of a special permissive licence.²¹

18 Allison et al., *Traditional Lifetime Stories*, Vol. II, p. 73; Parsons, *My Grandmother's Days*, p. 15.

19 In 1891 Ward One listed 812 domestic servants out of a total population of 8550. Ward Five with a population of 14,347 named 188. Canada, Census, 1891, manuscript. Claudette Lacelle notes that in 1871, 28 per cent of households in Ward 1 had servants compared to 10.1 per cent and 14.4 per cent in the two sections of Ward 5: *Urban Domestic Servants in 19th-Century Canada* (Ottawa, 1987), p. 81.

20 The first African-Nova Scotian to graduate from the Truro school was Madeline Francis Symonds in 1928. Nurse training and placement in hospitals was not available until 1946. Pachai, *Beneath the Clouds*, Vol. II, p. 190; Donald H. Clairmont, Dennis W. Magill, *Nova Scotian Blacks: An Historical and Structural Overview* (Halifax, 1970), p. 35.

21 *Morning Chronicle*, 3 December 1874. Miss Ann Joseph taught at the Colored School in Dartmouth.

The need for teachers in the black rural communities was constant. Few young women who had the option of residency in the city chose to return to the more difficult rural life. Good students were encouraged to get their licences but this did not affect the supply of available black teachers nor were they necessarily successful in obtaining positions in desirable schools. In 1891 the superintendent noted the case of a young black woman at the Halifax County Academy who, upon finishing her Grade C exam, was eligible for a permissive licence, but "I could not, however, persuade her to go to the country and teach, as her prospects were much better in the city".²² Selina Williams of Fall River was an exception. As a young black teacher with a permissive license who taught day school successively at North Preston and Beech Hill, in addition to her duties as a Sunday School teacher. Her unusual decision to stay in the county made her the object of Peter McKerrow's praise in his church history and in the convention minutes.²³ McKerrow concluded that "If a dozen or more of the young women in various sections of the country where these schools are organized would contemplate the good they would be doing for the race in years to come they would wake up, even now, to a sense of duty".²⁴ In this interesting assessment, McKerrow clearly placed the responsibility of education and "race improvement" on women, while at the same time implying the absence of this sense of duty among local young women. McKerrow's assumption that women were responsible for public education and community service drew upon the tenets of separate spheres ideology.

Education of daughters was taken seriously by many parents with at least one young woman sent to Boston when the racist policies of the Halifax school board prohibited access to education beyond grade seven.²⁵ But the desire for female literacy was not restricted to young girls. Forty-year-old laundress Eliza Johnston attended the Maynard Street school in the 1880s as a full-time student, achieving 100 per cent in several subjects for her efforts.²⁶ Rural women also cared about reading and writing. Selina Williams recalled in 1956 that when the North Preston school opened in 1897, mothers and fathers accompanied their children to class until the school inspector, concerned about overcrowding, agreed to provide lighting for an adult night school conducted three nights a week.²⁷

22 Nova Scotia, *Nova Scotia, House of Assembly Journal and Proceedings*, 1891, Appendix 5, Education, p. 52. Judith Fingard notes that Laura Howell taught in the Dartmouth school in 1891 and the Maynard Street School from 1896 to 1899. Martha Jones who finished her studies in 1884-5 was unable to find a position in the city. Fingard, "Race and Respectability", p. 188, ft 81. Maria Wood, of Beech Hill and Mary Bauld of Hammonds Plains are listed as school misses in 1871 and Esther Butler was listed in 1871 and 1881.

23 Nova Scotia, *House of Assembly Journal and Proceedings*, 1889, Appendix 5, Education; McKerrow, *Brief History of Colored Baptists*, p. 45; Pearleen Oliver, "From Generation to Generation; Bi-Centennial of the African Baptist Church in Nova Scotia", PANS.

24 Minutes of the 47th African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia Convention, 1900, Acadia University Archives [AUA].

25 Fingard, "Race and Respectability," p. 182.

26 Halifax School Registers, Lockman Street School, Maynard Street School, RG 14, R 1, PANS.

27 Although the county paid for lightening oil, Selina Williams taught for free. Edna Staebler, "Would You Change the Lives of These People?" *Maclean's*, 12 May 1956, p. 60.

Literacy or advanced education, however, did nothing to alter the basic fact that there were few careers open to young black women in Halifax. Many young women joined their brothers, husbands and parents or even set off by themselves to New England or Central Canada. That these women sent back to Halifax barrels of used clothes from employers suggests that even women who left the limited local opportunities still found themselves in the restricted field of domestic service.²⁸

Domestic service was the most important occupation for African-Nova Scotian women as noted in the census occupational listings. It was confirmed in the racist attitudes of Anglo-Celtic middle-class women such as Mary Jane Lawson, who conceded of her black Preston neighbours that "many of the women make good domestic servants".²⁹ Paid domestic labour in a private household is full of contradictions. Domestic work is perhaps the ultimate form of women's work, but not when it is performed in someone else's home, and not when it is undertaken as part of a wage relationship. Women performing domestic work outside their own homes undertook work that was simultaneously public and private, productive and reproductive.³⁰ The widespread nature of this work was reflected in the censuses, which listed 64 African-Nova Scotian women as servants in 1871 and 125 in 1881. A similar increase was recorded in the number of women listed as charwomen, who increased from six to 57. These dramatic increases were likely the result of slightly improved record-keeping rather than any specific change in the labour market. The only occupation for African-Nova Scotian women where numbers declined from 1871 to 1881 was work as laundresses; the 31 women in this group in 1871 declined to only five women ten years later. Mary Ann Brown Thomas, widow of James Bates Thomas, may have attempted to counterattack the advent of commercial laundries that affected casual employment opportunities in this area, listing herself in the 1880-81 city directory as the proprietor of Prince Wales Laundry, operating from her home. Such commercial attempts were rare and service occupations were typically private with some specialization as cooks, housekeepers and housecleaners. Specialization did not necessarily mean permanent residence with the employer. Halifax women may have preferred day labour where they did not live permanently in someone else's home and were not at the beck and call of the employer 24 hours a day. To achieve this independence and the possibility of a private life, one Hammonds Plains woman walked the eight miles into Bedford to do domestic work.³¹

28 Parsons, *My Grandmother's Days*, p. 27. Between 1870 and 1900 more than 90 per cent of employed African-Canadian women in Boston were classified as working in menial occupations: Elizabeth Hafkin Pleck, *Black Migration and Poverty: Boston, 1865-1900* (New York, 1979), p. 104.

29 Mrs. William Lawson, *History of the Townships of Dartmouth, Preston and Lawrencetown, Halifax County, Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1893), p. 192.

30 Dionne Brand, "Black Women and Work: The Impact of Racially Constructed Gender Roles on the Sexual Division of Labour, Part Two", *Fireweed*, 26 (Winter/Spring 1988), p. 87.

31 Parsons, *My Grandmother's Days*, p. 21; Harley, "For the Good of Family", p. 347. Harley noted that day work permitted domestic and family life.

Private work in someone else's home contrasted with the obviously public work black women undertook in their participation at the city market. Market activity combined domestic skills, market gardening, resourcefulness and imagination to ensure that the necessary supply of cash continued to come into the household. Surviving photographs and the classic 1872 sketch by W.O. Carlisle, "Negresses Selling Mayflowers on the Market Place", corroborate the literary evidence. Women from the county gathered wild fruits, according to one witness, from every conceivable kind of berry and flowers according to the season. In the early spring mayflowers and mosses appeared. These were followed by bouquets of ferns and little birchbark boxes. In the late fall and as Christmas approached, wreaths, evergreen swags and branches joined dyed grasses, "carefully pressed and waxed" autumn leaves, and sumach berries.³² Throughout the year, women also sold an assortment of herbs and "roots of miraculous properties", all kinds of market vegetables and "Brooms, baskets, tubs, clothes-props, peasticks, hop and bean poles, rustic seats and flower boxes". Some vendors also sold the famous baskets,³³ and one Preston woman in the 1891 census reflected this important trade when she identified herself as a basketmaker. Preparing these goods for market meant a tremendous amount of work that combined reproductive and productive labour and the efforts of most members of the household. Various goods had to be made, grown or painstakingly gathered, and then arranged and transported into the city. In such a complex group of household activities the boundary between public productive and private reproductive work is impossible to isolate.

While separate spheres ideology limited the economic opportunities available to African-Nova Scotian women, it did not offer reciprocal financial protection. Low pay and irregular work meant that African-Nova Scotian women were dependent on access to a male wage, even if it was lower and more irregular than that available to other working-class men. Economic circumstances also meant that women were not protected from the workplace. Rural women lived and worked on their farms. The time women spent fashioning splitwood baskets or arranging bouquets to be sold at the city market was not distinct from other household duties such as childcare or tending the garden. Likewise, urban women engaged in domestic service or employed in family business experienced no spatial differentiation between the location of work and home.

This lack of spatial differentiation was evident even among the McKerrow-Thomas family, one of the most prominent African-Nova Scotian families in the city and county. Sometime in the 1840s the Welshman James Thomas married Hannah Saunders, an African-Nova Scotian living in Preston.

32 Lawson, *History of the Townships of Dartmouth, Preston and Lawrencetown*, p. 188-9; *Novascotian* (Halifax), 17 October 1885; Margaret Marshall Saunders, *The House of Armour* (Philadelphia, 1897), pp. 287-8. Saunders noted that African-Nova Scotian women were not the only women to sell their goods at the market as she also mentions the presence of Acadian women from the Eastern Shore.

33 Joleen Gordon, *Edith Clayton's Market Basket, A Heritage of Splitwood Basketry in Nova Scotia*, photographs by Ronald Merrick and diagrams by George Halverson (Halifax, 1977).

Thomas eventually became leader of the African Baptist Church of Nova Scotia and fathered with Hannah at least seven children. Religious leadership, business success and marriages of the children linked the Thomas family to the most respectable black families of Halifax. Among the connections of this family was the marriage of daughter Mary Eliza to Antigua-born Peter McKerrow in 1863. McKerrow was a leading member of the Morning Glory Lodge of Good Templars, the Ancient and Accepted Masons Union Lodge No. 18, trustee of Cornwallis Street African Baptist Church and secretary to the Nova Scotia African Baptist Association.³⁴

In 1892 the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia heard an appeal case regarding property from the estate of Rev. James Thomas that had been lost through foreclosure and then secretly purchased by his son-in-law and estate executor Peter McKerrow. McKerrow claimed his acquisition of the property was without the knowledge of his wife or three sisters-in-law and that he was uncertain as to when they eventually discovered the transaction as he had “never discussed the matter with any of them”.³⁵ Furthermore, McKerrow claimed his wife Mary had co-executed this mortgage without becoming familiar with the contents of the papers she was signing. Since one aspect of this case was the right of the female heirs to a monthly annuity from the property, it is conceivable that they feigned ignorance to strengthen their case to entitlement of monies owing. That none of these female heirs, including his wife, knew of McKerrow’s financial dealings would have been quite remarkable. Three of the heirs, Rachel Thomas, Inez Thomas and Mary McKerrow were living in the same residence as McKerrow. Working as clerks in the business at the time of the transaction, they probably possessed some knowledge of the firm’s operation. On the other hand, their financial ignorance was possible and if the ideology of separate spheres, which protected women from the marketplace, was present in any African-Nova Scotian households, it was likely to be found here. The desire for respectability and possible upward mobility partially rested on appropriate gender roles, including the adoption of separate spheres ideology even when material and class circumstances did not allow for an actual separation of workplace and residence. Certainly there was not physical protection from the workplace. Three of Rev. James Thomas’s daughters resided at some point at the same address as the family’s hat and fur business; in addition, Thomas’s son William and his second wife Laura not only lived beside the Sackville Street family business, but Laura had a separate listing in the city and provincial directory to advertise her business as a dressmaker and milliner.

34 Fingard, “Race and Respectability”, pp. 174-6.

35 Daniel McN. Parker, Wm J. Lewis, Wm. F. Parker Executors of last will and test of Martin P. Black, plaintiffs and Wm. B. Thomas, Peter E. McKerrow, Thomas G.D. Scotland, Jas. T. McKerrow, Wm. B. Thomas Peter E. McKerrow executors of last will and testament James Thomas and Moses Vineberg, Bernard Kortosk, Jacob G. Ascher (Kortosk and Co.) and Rachel C. Sockume, Mary E. McKerrow, Inez E. Thomas, Elizabeth Ann Johnston, defendants, ‘A’ Appeals - Supreme Court of Nova Scotia, Volume 9, 1891-92: # 3360, RG 39, PANS.

The notion of protecting women from the economic world was also not present in the estate of John Robinson Thomas, Rev. James Thomas's oldest son and Peter McKerrow's brother-in-law. Upon John Thomas's death in 1876 he had two insurance policies of \$2,000 and \$1,000 that should have provided some security for his widow and three children under the age of nine. Of this amount, however, his wife Eliza, received only \$500, while \$1,500 was to be invested and divided among the three children when they reached the age of majority. A further \$1,000 was given to his father along with his share in the family business. Long-term support for the widow or for the children until they qualified for their inheritance did not appear to be a primary concern of John Thomas. As a result, in the 1881 census widow Eliza Bailey Thomas was listed as a charwoman; the children were living with neighbours and their maternal step-grandmother, not the Thomas family who received the generous proportion of their father's estate.³⁶ The extent to which this estate was unusual, where financial protection for an aging parent took priority over providing for a young family, is unknown as so few wills were recorded. It may have been that John Thomas believed that his widow was in a better position to support herself than his aging father and mother.

The public survival skills expected of Eliza Bailey Thomas conflict with assumptions of the female character and expose the limitations of exactly which women were to be included within "women's sphere". Dionne Brand has noted that African-Americans were rarely perceived by the dominant culture as "ladies" and that the term lady had "predictable race and class connotations". White ladies were protected by the private sphere of motherhood and genteel domesticity, made possible by material circumstances that were beyond the resources of most black women.³⁷ The types of waged employment available to African-Nova Scotians were tasks that women traditionally performed, but they were with rare exception suitable work for "ladies".³⁸ Black women were expected to be engaged in hard physical labour such as scrubbing, thereby confirming their unladylike reputation; yet, at the same time, those who restricted their labour to the private domestic sphere and expected their husbands to act as breadwinners could be perceived as lazy.³⁹ In creating the image of the unladylike woman, race reinforced and worked together with class so that the bonds of womanhood were narrow.

Nova Scotian women of European descent were careful to distance and differentiate themselves from black women with racist characterizations and descriptions of their unladylike behaviour. In Margaret Marshall Saunders'

36 Nova Scotia Probate Court, John Robinson Thomas, #2299, 1876. Eliza Thomas appears to have inherited property on Creighton Street from her father after his death in 1886. RG 35-102, 'A', #8 1890 Street Ward Five Valuation Book, PANS.

37 Brand, "Black Women and Work: Part Two", p. 91. See Phyllis Marynick Palmer, "White Women/Black Women: The Dualism of Female Identity and Experience in the United States", *Feminist Studies*, 9, 1 (Spring 1983), p. 153; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1985).

38 Brand, "Black Women and Work: Part Two", p. 91.

39 bell hooks, *Ain't I a woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, 1981), p. 78.

depictions of black women in her journal entries and novels, she emphasized their unrestrained and therefore unladylike manners such as laughing loudly or swearing, and even alleged masculine characteristics such as smoking pipes or walking with a basket balanced on their heads.⁴⁰ Mary Jane Lawson's offensive comparison of the Preston women at market to monkeys is well-known — "chattering and like them enjoying the warmth and pleasantness of summer". Less familiar is the scorn she heaps on African-Nova Scotian women for playing at being real ladies in the festive atmosphere surrounding summer baptisms. Lawson sarcastically noted that "Before such events, there is a great demand for articles of dress: parasols, hoop-skirts, sash ribbons, veils, and fans, are all apparently necessary adjuncts of the ceremony". The fact that the symbols of femininity and middle-class womanhood were subject to mockery when associated with African-Nova Scotia women immediately attunes us to the links between racism and sex. In the late 19th century black women in Halifax County were equally vulnerable to ridicule by their association with masculine paraphernalia such as pipes or the most feminine accessories of dress.⁴¹

The press also delighted in providing examples of "unladylike" behaviour among African-Nova Scotian women, such as that of the woman in 1874 found guilty of beating her husband with a potato masher.⁴² The events that precipitated this reaction were irrelevant as ridicule and her unfeminine reaction became central in portraying a woman who actively defended herself. An unorganized wedding ceremony that nearly resulted in the bridesmaid and groomsman mistakenly marrying was another opportunity to exaggerate the differences between white and black women. In the confusion a white woman stepped up "who like all her sex and color, knew the ceremony well" and stopped the proceedings before the wrong couple wed. The point of this story under the sarcastic byline of "Almost Fatal Mistake" was that black women were not even familiar with the most important female ritual of the wedding.⁴³

In the same way, racial stereotypes about black sexuality and the economic realities of African-Nova Scotian women could reinforce each other in the minds of the white middle-class. That African-Nova Scotian women composed a disproportionate number of the city's prostitutes is hardly surprising in light of the absence of alternative occupations. While this figure may be inflated by the special attention directed at black prostitutes, the result of their visibility as a racial minority, it nonetheless underlines the lack of legal options available.⁴⁴ The

40 Saunders, *The House of Armour*, pp. 287-8. Margaret Conrad, Toni Laidlaw, and Donna Smyth, eds., *No Place Like Home: Diaries and Letters of Nova Scotia Women* (Halifax, 1988), "Margaret Marshall Saunders".

41 Lawson, *History of the Townships*, pp. 188, 190. The important connection between finery, or dressing above one's class and the fallen woman is the subject of Mariana Valverde, "The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse", *Victorian Studies*, 32, 2 (Winter 1989), pp. 169-88.

42 *Morning Chronicle*, 22 September 1874.

43 *Morning Chronicle*, 22 January 1874.

44 B. Jane Price, "'Raised in Rockhead. Died in the Poor House': Female Petty Criminals in Halifax, 1864-1890", in Philip Girard and Jim Phillips, eds., *Essays in the History of Canadian Law, Vol. III, Nova Scotia* (Toronto, 1990), pp. 200-31.

association between prostitution and African-Nova Scotians may have influenced white middle-class attitudes. Judith Fingard has hypothesized that the lack of female reform agitation around this “social problem” in part may be the result of its association with the African-Nova Scotian community.⁴⁵ If this damning racism was true, it suggests the extreme extent to which white women distanced themselves from their African-Nova Scotian sisters. White women wanted to make certain that not all women were included in their sphere.

As a result of this racial malignancy and meagre economic options, it was not surprising that elements of separate spheres ideology were adopted by the black community. The ideology offered advantages beyond accommodation to the dominant culture. Sharon Harley in her work on African-American women has noted that a strictly defined sexual division of labour could be instrumental in supporting claims to middle class status, or to what Judith Fingard might describe perhaps more appropriately as respectability. In addition to status, adherence to clearly defined gender roles could also protect single and married African-American women from racist charges of “immorality” used to undermine this femininity.⁴⁶ This interpretation appeared to be supported by the analysis of Carrie Best, born in 1903 in New Glasgow, who described her mother as “a meticulous homemaker and cook” whose duties extended beyond her home as she worked for at least one other family. But working outside the home in no way seemed to interfere with the importance she placed on her role as a wife and mother. As Best observed of her mother: “Although kind, loving and generous she was none the less a disciplinarian guarding the sanctity of the home and family safety like a lioness with her cubs. Black womanhood was held in low esteem during the early part of the twentieth century and only the home afforded the protection needed to ensure security from outside influences”.⁴⁷ Best’s description of her mother reveals the distinctive way that separate spheres ideology was interpreted by African-Nova Scotian women as it mixed the idea of protection offered by the private sphere with power and strength. Here was not a metaphor that projected the domestic sphere as a haven for delicate and helpless women but rather as the lair of the proud and strong lioness and her cubs.

Almost all that was happening within peoples’ residences remains concealed. Although no topic in North American history has produced more debate than the discussion of the African-American family, family structure among 19th-century African-Nova Scotians is unexplored. The general debate has been largely characterized by the label of the matriarchal family, offering the false impression that women had more power than was the actual case. Matriarchy has been used as a relative term to contrast the gender relations around power in the middle-class Euro-American family. African-Nova Scotian women probably had more power within the household than their white middle-class counterparts. But as Suzanne

45 Fingard, *The Dark Side of Life in Victorian Halifax*, p. 97.

46 Harley, “For the Good of Family”, p. 347.

47 Carrie M. Best, *That Lonesome Road* (New Glasgow, 1977), p. 43.

Lebsock has cogently argued, “given this standard, women need not be the equals of men, much less men’s superiors, in order to qualify as matriarchs”.⁴⁸ The label of matriarch given the black family actually offers much insight into the structure of white middle-class households. Given the American literature one would also expect to find numerous female-headed households. While there is some evidence in the frustrated notes of the census enumerator of alternative household structures, notably common-law relationships, the census data does not appear to suggest an unusually high degree of female-headed households, even in this transient port city (see Table Three).⁴⁹ In Halifax it also does not appear that women deliberately chose not to marry. Prominent widows with property who remarried included Hannah Saunders Thomas, Louisa Brown Bailey and Eliza Bailey Thomas.⁵⁰ What seems to be most distinct about the structure of African-Nova Scotian households, both urban and rural, was the number of children with different surnames than the household head, or the number of third generation children residing in the household. This fluid household structure cautions us against imposing a preconceived definition of the private family. The public/private divide may have had different boundaries as extended family and neighbours’ children were frequently incorporated into what one might have considered to be the most closed and personal relationship.

Like their Euro-American counterparts, at times African-Nova Scotian women were purposely kept out of the public, particularly the political, sphere. A 1864 petition from “the coloured population of Hammonds Plains” was submitted by 40 men and on behalf of “14 Widows and some other helpless Females with Families”.⁵¹ Similarly, women did not sign the petitions criticizing racially-segregated schools, although they did attend and speak at meetings on the topic.⁵² To what extent this exclusion and emphasis on women reflected political power in the black community is unknown, but it seems plausible that, at least partially, women were excluded in the hope of benefiting from relief grants or better school through conforming to the obvious patterns in the dominant culture.⁵³

48 Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York, 1985), p. 88.

49 “Their marriages are in many instances more connexion for a short season”. Census manuscript, Halifax, 1871, Ward 5 F-2, p. 60 [microfilm reel C10552].

50 Lebsock, *Free Women of Petersburg*, p. 52. For Hannah Thomas Colley, see May 1881, p. 85, Marriage Records, Halifax County, PANS. For Louisa Brown Bailey, see McKerrow, *Brief History*, Marriage List, 9 January 1877 and 152 Creighton St., 2 Gerrish Lane, 1890 Street Ward 5, Valuation Book, RG 35 A5, PANS. For Eliza Bailey Thomas Ewing, see Fingard, “Race and Respectability”, p. 178 and 190 Creighton St., 1890 Street Ward 5, Valuation Book, RG 35, A5, PANS.

51 Terrence Punch, “Petition of the Coloured Population of Hammonds Plains”, *The Nova Scotia Genealogist*, V, I (1987), p. 40. Original is in RG “p” Vol. 88, doc. 8 (microfilm), PANS.

52 Fingard, “Race and Respectability”, p. 173; *Morning Chronicle*, 17 June 1892.

53 Women of European descent in the Maritimes were active petitioners: see Gail Campbell, “Disfranchised but not Quiescent: Women Petitioners in New Brunswick in the Mid-19th Century”, *Acadiensis*, XVIII, 2 (Spring 1989), pp. 22-54. Judith Fingard notes that in 1873 African-Nova Scotian mothers from Zion School petitioned the school commissioners to introduce sex-segregated classes: Fingard, “Race and Respectability”, p. 181.

On the other hand, while all female organizations were slow to develop within the African-Nova Scotian community, masculine institutional social life from the 1870s on was varied and included the Morning Glory Lodge of the Good Templars, the African-Nova Scotian Lodge of the Freemasons and the African Choral and Literary Association.⁵⁴ These African-Nova Scotian fraternal organizations paralleled similar associations in the Protestant and Catholic Euro-American community. In the most formal aspects of public life, there was very little space for women, regardless of race.

This contradiction between formal and informal roles was nowhere more apparent than in the African-Nova Scotian churches. Separate spheres ideology, which emphasized the special spiritual nature of women, could easily justify leadership positions within the church. Yet this leadership was primarily informal. In his history of the African Baptist Association, Peter McKerrow lists more women than men in church membership and praises their contribution as “the women ...in most of the churches, take the lead”. McKerrow, however, could not allow these words of praise to stand on their own, and women’s public position in the Nova Scotia churches was justified by biblical precedent: “Good women are like the precious stones. Our saviour found no fault with the woman who went into the city and told all thing that ever she did. Dorcas made clothes for the poor of her community. Priscilla, with her husband, took Apollos and instructed him more perfectly in the way of God”.⁵⁵ Thus women had a historic role in the church, but the models presented were not the dynamic, independent and powerful women of the Old Testament, but the more feminine servants and teachers of the New Testament.

Like the seamstress and the teacher, the church provided women the opportunity for acceptable public roles such as Sunday School teachers, organists and singers.⁵⁶ Women, however, were perhaps less acceptable in church politics as participants in the internal split that divided the African Baptist Association throughout the 1870s. Rev. James Thomas noted women’s involvement in this split in his 1871 circular letter that read: “The Church at Halifax stands true to her first organ and rules, with the exception of one male and 2 or 3 female: let us pray for them”. Thomas then went on to note that “A number of the brethren and sisters in Preston sent a letter to the Association, stating that they were in a divided state”.⁵⁷ Women were thus active in church politics even though they were generally excluded by formal structures of church government and religious leadership.⁵⁸

54 *Morning Chronicle*, 4 February 1874; Frederick Cozzens, *Acadia: or a month with the Blue Noses* (New York, 1877), p. 33; *Acadian Recorder*, 19 June 1879.

55 McKerrow, *Brief History of the Colored Baptists*, p. 55.

56 Minutes of the 27th African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia Convention, 1880 at Halifax, AUA.

57 Minutes of the 18th African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia Convention, 1871 at Hammonds Plains, AUA.

58 Like Euro-American women in Nova Scotia, African-Nova Scotian women in the 1790s had been important lay preachers and religious leaders. James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists*; George

Table Three
African-Nova Scotian Household Structure
in Halifax County, 1871 and 1881

	Female-headed households with children under 12		Households with children under 12 in which a married male and female are listed		Households with children under 12 with a surname different than household head or when born after woman 50	
	1871	1881	1871	1881	1871	1881
	Ward One	0	0	0	0	0
Ward Two	0	0	12	0	0	0
Ward Three	6	2	11	6	1	0
Ward Four	3	2	7	10	1	0
Ward Five	13	14	38	56	6	14
Ward Six	1	0	7	17	1	0
Beech Hill	2	1	8	6	3	0
Hammonds Plains	5	4	36	37	17	15
Dartmouth	2	6	22	26	5	3
Windsor Road	2	1	7	8	3	7
Truro Road	3	3	7	11	1	4
Preston	10	12	51	65	7	33
Other	1	0	2	1	0	0

Source: Canada, Census manuscripts, 1871 and 1881 [microfilm], "Nominal Return of the Living".

Minutes from various meetings of the British Methodist Episcopal Church in Nova Scotia make no specific mention of women except in a motion of appreciation to the hosting clergyman "and lady" and as the subject in a charge of seduction against an Amherst clergyman.⁵⁹ Similarly, the African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia met for 37 years before its first female delegate attended the 1891 convention.⁶⁰ The

Rawlyk, *Ravished by the Spirit: Religious Revivals, Baptists and Henry Alline* (Montreal-Kingston, 1984), p. 82.

59 *Minutes of the Three Annual Conferences of the British Methodist Episcopal Church, Nova Scotia - At Liverpool July 18th to 22nd, 1884*. (Chatham, Ontario 1884), p 41, Arnett Papers, Wilberforce University, Wilberforce, Ohio, pp. 58, 101; Nova Scotia District: 31 July 1868; 2 June 1877; 18-26 May 1878; 15-19 May 1879; 7-10 May 1880; 8-11 July 1881; 18-22 July 1884.

60 Pachai, *Beneath the Clouds*, Vol. II, p. 78; Pearleen Oliver, *Brief History of the Colored Baptists of Nova Scotia, 1782-1953* (Halifax, 1953).

following year three women were among the delegates, including Louisa Bailey and sisters Cooper and Fletcher.

The position of women within the local Baptist church had a dramatic boost in 1903 with the arrival of Rev. B.B.B. Johnson at the Cornwallis Street Church. Johnson himself was probably not unlike other American clergy who had brief sojourn in Nova Scotia, except for one unique asset — his wife was ordained. The presence of Mrs. M.E. Johnson, temporarily at least, changed the face of public worship at the 1903 convention at East Preston. Mrs. Johnson led the convention in two prayers and joined in a temperance sermon.⁶¹ In 1904 she perhaps unintentionally violated Nova Scotia law when she married Edward Wilson and Sophia Smith at Preston.⁶² With this exception, Mrs. Rev. Johnson appears to have spent much more time with the children in Sunday School than publicly preaching the gospel.⁶³

Mrs. Johnson was not the only woman to publicly speak to the African Baptist assembly. Lay leadership was frequently female and included the Nova Scotia-born Louisa Bailey. Bailey's church interests were originally directed in the area of foreign missions but later shifted to local mission fields and temperance. By the late 1880s, Louisa Bailey was twice widowed and had connections to important families in the Baptist Church.⁶⁴ She was relatively financially secure, owning property on Creighton Street and Gerrish Lane and working successively as a dressmaker, variety and second-hand shopkeeper, and finally as a herbalist from a store-front on Gottingen Street.⁶⁵ At the 1885 Baptist convention, Bailey was among the three women who addressed the meeting on temperance. According to McKerrow she "spoke admirable on the question at issue, showing the great influence that women have either for good or evil". Again, the influence of the separate spheres ideology, that women had a special role in promoting morality, was obvious in McKerrow's conclusion that "If Christian women would nobly stand up against the drink traffic wherever they go, they will be using an influence the greatness of which eternity alone will reveal, and a just recompense will be their reward".⁶⁶ In 1892 Bailey, one

61 Minutes of the 50th African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia Convention, 1903 at East Preston, AUA.

62 Register, Halifax County 1904, p. 99, No. 301, PANS. The Nova Scotia Marriage Act stated that weddings could be conducted only by men: *Revised Statutes of Nova Scotia, 1900*, Vol. 2, Ch. 111, Sn. 3, p. 220.

63 Minutes of the 50th African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia Convention, 1903 at East Preston, p. 18, AUA.

64 Louisa Brown Bailey was widow of Rev Alexander Bailey — a supporter of Rev James Thomas in the religious rivalry that split the African Baptist Church and trusted friend of James Thomas as witness to his will. In addition Bailey was step-mother of John Robinson Thomas' wife, cared for two of the Thomas grandchildren and shared her house in 1871 with one of Thomas' future sons-in-law, William Johnston.

65 RG 35-102 A #5 1890 Street Ward 5 Valuation Book, PANS; *Halifax City Directory*, 1881, 1885, 1896.

66 Minutes of the 32nd African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia Convention, 1885 at Cornwallis, AUA.

of the first female delegates to attend any convention, again “spoke with much force” on the important issue of temperance.⁶⁷ Her addresses to the various Baptist conventions thereafter were regular as she continued her involvement in temperance, home mission and local church operations.⁶⁸ Although there was no formal organization for home mission work, Louisa Bailey together with Charlotte Grosse of Beech Hill “gave verbal statements of work performed by them at Beech Hill and adjoining settlements”. The work of Bailey and Grosse was recognized in the church’s mission report and by the Africville congregation who also were touched by their hard work.⁶⁹ Whether Louisa Bailey herself upheld the ideology of separate spheres and a limited public role for women is difficult to determine. Certainly her private life was full. After her husband’s death Bailey had the responsibility for her successive businesses, an aging mother and two step-grandchildren. Similarly, her colleague in home missions, Charlotte Grosse, was able to combine active leadership outside the house with the responsibility for seven children who in the 1881 census were between the ages of less than a year and 13.⁷⁰ As for white working-class women who joined the Salvation Army, religious work provided a legitimate justification for moving beyond the domestic sphere,⁷¹ and we must surmise that both Bailey and Grosse crossed boundaries that defined the proper place for women. At the same time, Louisa Bailey at least appears to have been cautious and aware of the potential conflict in her public leadership. At the 1907 convention, as a woman who was probably approaching her seventies, “She told how much can be done in a quiet way to advance God’s Kingdom upon earth by sisters as well as brothers”.⁷² If Louisa Bailey actually used the phrase “quiet way” to convey the idea that the public actions of women were not completely acceptable, and this description was not the opinion of the convention secretary, the delicate balance between public and private roles for women was acknowledged.

The presence of remarkable women in “quiet” but vital leadership positions may explain why women’s groups within the church were slow to develop. As early as 1883, Peter McKerrow began his campaign for the establishment of female home

67 Minutes of the 39th African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia Convention, 1892 at Dartmouth Lake Church, p. 6, AUA.

68 Minutes of the 42nd African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia Convention, 1895, AUA.

69 Minutes of the 50th African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia Convention, 1903, at East Preston, pp. 15, 20, AUA. The spelling Grosse and Grouse are both used.

70 It appears that a poem by Louisa Bailey about her mother was included in McKerrow’s history of the African Baptist Church. The poem is signed only L.A. Bailey. Bailey married for a third time sometime between 1907 and her death in 1911. *Herald*, 30 December 1911, *Acadian Recorder*, 30 December 1911. In Allison *et al.*, *Traditional Lifetime Stories*, Vol. II, Deacon Reginald Hamilton noted the importance of his grandmother Charlotte Grouse, p. 50.

71 Lynne Marks, “Working-Class Femininity and the Salvation Army: Hallelujah Lasses in English Canada, 1882-1892”, in Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, eds., *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women’s History* (Toronto, 1991), p. 198.

72 Minutes of the 54th African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia Convention, 1907, p. 4, AUA.

missionary societies in every congregation as “their labors are generally more successful than the males”.⁷³ No action followed this call and again in 1903 an equally unsuccessful motion was presented by the “Reverend Sister Johnson”. Thereafter, nothing formal was established for ten years until the creation of the Women’s Missionary Society in 1913 and the Ladies’ Auxiliary in 1917.⁷⁴ Quasi-women’s groups had emerged in the 1890s, such as the Pastor Aid Society at the Cornwallis Street Church with Louisa Bailey as president and Mary Eliza McKerrow as vice-president. This was not a formal women’s group, for although most of the executive appears to have been women, the important position of secretary was held by Peter McKerrow himself.⁷⁵ The appearance of largely women’s groups with perhaps a token man was also characteristic of white women’s organizations in the city.⁷⁶ Female church organization developed very late among the African-Nova Scotian women, largely because women were not fulfilling an auxiliary role but were at the centre of financial and spiritual leadership. While women such as Louisa Bailey and Charlotte Grosse stand out, less prominent women also played a crucial role. Access to paid employment meant that to a limited extent women were also able, if they so chose, to financially support their church. This financial contribution by women was impressive in the 1903 list of church members who had paid their annual tax. At the Cornwallis Street Church, 11 couples were listed, along with nine men and 16 single women. This pattern of extraordinary support from single women was repeated in the rural areas such as Beech Hill where two single men are listed beside nine women.⁷⁷

The churches acted as both a space for women to provide financial and spiritual leadership and a buttress for those in the community who upheld a belief in separate spheres. The church also provided a haven where public behaviour was almost safe from ridicule.⁷⁸ The acceptable way for women to be strong and have an identity outside the home was spiritually. Therefore when Hammonds Plains native Caroline David died in 1903 she was described as a “kind mother, a loving wife and a true child of God”.⁷⁹ Similarly, Viola Parsons remembered stories of her great-

73 Minutes of the 30th African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia Convention, 1883 at Weymouth, AUA.

74 Oliver, *A Brief History of Colored Baptists*; In 1915 a similar organization called the Daughters of Zion was in operation at the Halifax Methodist Church. *Halifax Herald*, 1 March 1915.

75 Minutes of the 39th African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia Convention, 1892 at Halifax, p. 10, AUA.

76 E.R. Forbes, “Battles in Another War: Edith Archibald and the Halifax Feminist Movement”, *Challenging the Regional Stereotype: Essays on the 20th Century Maritimes* (Fredericton, 1989), p. 81.

77 Harley, “For the Good of Family”, p. 348; Minutes of the 50th African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia Convention, 1903 at East Preston, p. 12, AUA.

78 African-Nova Scotian men were also vulnerable to ridicule. Rev. James Thomas in his 1877 circular letter commented on visitors to the convention “the strangers who had flocked from the city, and neighbouring districts;... some to worship others to mock and criticize”: Minutes of the 24th African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia Convention, 1877, Hammonds Plains, AUA.

79 Minutes of the 50th African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia Convention, 1903 at East Preston, AUA.

grandmother Sarah Anderson, probably born in the 1830s. Parsons was told that her great-grandfather “was an easy going man, but [great-grand] Ma was strong, courageous and a hard worker. She didn’t have any fear because she was filled with the Holy Spirit”.⁸⁰ This hard worker was widowed with ten children in 1871 and operated one of the most productive farms in Hammonds Plains. African-Nova Scotian women, who were often the object of ridicule had few occasions to be presented with dignity in the white press. Yet a description of a large baptism at Africville in 1874 conceded that “the white robes of the lady converts presented quite a pleasing appearance”.⁸¹ In a specific religious moment, even the racist press could briefly see African-Nova Scotian women as ladies.

The ideological construction of separate spheres had meaning to African-Nova Scotian women, but it could not be taken at face value. The ideal of separate spheres, with its emphasis on supposedly broad-based unique characteristics, was based on the experience of middle-class Euro-American women. When these women categorized and classified black women, the veneer of sisterhood did not stand up, and separate spheres became a tool of racism to exclude women who were different. Euro-American men and women who professed a belief in separate spheres worked to ensure that gender was not to be the only primary division within society. Common links that existed between black and white working-class women and all women tied to rural subsistence production were not recognized. Separation of productive and reproductive work in most rural subsistence households was a fiction, and the segregation of work and home was equally unlikely in the city. The public lives of African-Nova Scotian women were marked by an informality and a corresponding vulnerability, which occurred in the context of a lively informal economy and lay leadership positions in the church. Gender ideology that placed women in the home offered protection and dignity within their own community, even if it could not secure recognition from the white middle class. While the ideology of separate spheres could be usefully adopted to respond to the particular needs of African-Nova Scotian women it also made them susceptible to a powerful combination of racism and sexism.

80 Parsons, *My Grandmother's Days*, p. 18.

81 *Morning Chronicle*, 1 June 1874.