



# Not All Wives: Women of Colonial Philadelphia

*Karin Wulf*

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## **Not All Wives: Women of Colonial Philadelphia** Karin Wulf

Marital status was a fundamental legal and cultural feature of women's identity in the eighteenth century. Free women who were not married could own property and make wills, contracts, and court appearances, rights that the law of coverture prevented their married sisters from enjoying. Karin Wulf explores the significance of marital status in this account of unmarried women in Philadelphia, the largest city in the British colonies.

In a major act of historical reconstruction, Wulf draws upon sources ranging from tax lists, censuses, poor relief records, and wills to almanacs, newspapers, correspondence, and poetry in order to recreate the daily experiences of women who were never-married, widowed, divorced, or separated. With its substantial population of unmarried women, eighteenth-century Philadelphia was much like other early modern cities, but it became a distinctive proving ground for cultural debate and social experimentation involving those women. Arguing that unmarried women shaped the city as much as it shaped them, Wulf examines popular literary representations of marriage, the economic hardships faced by women, and the decisive impact of a newly masculine public culture in the late colonial period.

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