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‘Women enterprisers and enslavers in Kingston’s Globalizing Emporium, 1700-60’

This paper explores the business ventures of a diverse group of European, Euro-African and African women who aided in transforming Kingston, Jamaica into one of the most important entrepôts in the Atlantic world. It shows how a combination of local and imperial circumstances including Britain’s emphasis on open trade, inter-imperial warfare, catastrophic mortality rates in Jamaica, and the rapid expansion of slavery on the island, created a space for women to play central roles in commerce. More than a quarter of the households in the city were headed by women. Some of them experienced the depredations that accompanied the pressures of supporting their families, while others pursued the new economic opportunities on the island. As the Scottish merchant James Houston aptly observed during his sojourn there, “Money is Emperor of the world, and I am sure that, it is the Lord of Jamaica.” Women contributed to this thriving commercial environment, leveraging ready access to imported goods to forge a range of licit and illicit ventures. They purchased urban property and worked as tavern keepers, shopkeepers, milliners, and merchants. The rapid expansion of chattel slavery in Jamaica underwrote its economic success. Here, too, women played active roles. During the 1720s, Kingston became the largest depot in the Atlantic slave trade, and port-dwelling women exploited their proximity to the market in human beings. A diverse range of female-owned businesses relied upon the labor of enslaved people to profit. Altogether, Kingston’s urban and maritime-oriented female colonists helped to suture together colonial, Caribbean, Atlantic, and increasingly global markets. Their actions demonstrate that Jamaica was far more than a sugar island. During the first half of the eighteenth century, Kingston became a place where the impetus for profit could blunt gender, status, or racial differences, affording novel financial possibilities for ambitious women who, in turn, acted as handmaidens for valuable branches of trade that helped to secure Jamaica’s rising economic dominance in the British Empire.