

Women and the Revolutionary War

Introduction:

The revolutionary generation included numerous women who contributed to the struggle for independence. Like other groups of revolutionaries, women were involved in the Revolution long before the first shots of war were fired, taking part in boycotts, organizing spinning bees, and signing petitions. Women also served during the war as spies, like Lydia Darragh, and even disguising themselves as men to serve as soldiers, like Deborah Sampson and Margaret Corbin.

As colonies declared independence and began forming new governments and constitutions, many women took the opportunity to expand their political voices. Abigail Adams pleaded with her husband John to “remember the ladies” when considering whom to include in these new governments. While women continued to be barred from the political sphere in most states and certainly in the national government, ideas about women’s roles changed during and after the Revolution. Leaders of the new nation wanted women to be educated in order to raise good republican sons. When the new republic was in its infancy, many leaders keenly felt the fragility of this experiment in government. The best protection against failure, they believed, was a virtuous citizenry, and virtue was to be instilled by churches, schools, and families. Within families, the mother's role was the most crucial. Motherhood assumed almost the importance of "a fourth branch of government." Emphasis on virtue led to a new emphasis on households and therefore on women. Some post-revolutionary women adopted republican motherhood as an ideology that carved out a political niche for themselves. Constrained to the domestic sphere, they imbued that domain with unprecedented significance. Prior to the Revolution, political leaders viewed the domestic realm as peripheral to public welfare, but afterward they saw the home as pivotal to the fate of the republic. Political virtue became domesticated, and the republican mother became the "custodian of civic morality." Republican motherhood offered a way to combine domesticity with political and civic roles.

Your task is to investigate the impact that the Revolution had on women, both during and after the war. Was Republican Motherhood a boon for females and enhance their place in society, or did it simply serve as another way to relegate women to separate spheres? How did revolutionary ideals impact women and the ways society thought about women? Overall, to what extent was the Revolution revolutionary for women? Use pages 248-252 in your book as well as the sources I have compiled to analyze the effects of the Revolution on American women.

"A Society of Patriotic Ladies"

Introduction

In response to Parliamentary taxation of imported goods, including tea, Anglo-Americans launched a series of protests during the late 1760s and early 1770s. The most famous protest was the Boston Tea Party, at which men dressed as Indians and dumped hundreds of chests of tea into Boston Harbor. Other communities throughout the colonies staged various forms of protest, many involving women. In North Carolina, for example, fifty-one members of the Edenton Ladies' Patriotic Guild signed a pledge in support of colonial resistance. The Edenton Tea Party was one of the earliest organized women's political actions in United States history. On October 25, 1774, Mrs. Penelope Barker organized, at the home of Mrs. Elizabeth King, fifty-one women in Edenton, North Carolina. Together they formed an alliance wholeheartedly supporting the American cause against "taxation without representation." News of the Edenton Tea Party quickly reached Britain. During the 1770s, political resistance was common. But an organized women's movement was not--Women were not supposed to join in political activities, so those who did were often subjected to ridicule by people opposed to the causes such women supported. So, the Edenton Tea Party shocked the Western world. From England, in January 1775, Arthur Iredell wrote his brother, James Iredell, describing England's reaction to the Edenton Tea Party. According to Arthur Iredell, the incident was not taken seriously because it was led by women. He sarcastically remarked, "The only security on our side ... is the probability that there are but few places in America which possess so much female artillery as Edenton." The engraving below was produced by an English artist who most likely aimed at undermining the credibility of American protests by suggesting that women participating in them were hardly "ladies."

Questions to Consider

- What does the cartoon suggest about women engaged in political acts?
- What does the cartoon suggest were a "lady's" proper concerns?
- If women became involved in politics, what would become of their households and their families?
- According to the cartoonist, what did the events in Edenton imply about male colonists and about the future of colonial society?



Source:

"A society of patriotic ladies, at Edenton in North Carolina,"
printed for R. Sayer & J. Bennett, London, March 25, 1775.

A SOCIETY OF PATRIOTIC LADIES,
AT
EDENTON IN NORTH CAROLINA.

Plate V.

Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776

Introduction

Women also supported the Revolution by running their families' farms and shops while their husbands performed public service. Abigail Adams, for example, stayed in Braintree, Massachusetts, to oversee the family farm while her husband, John, traveled to Philadelphia to serve in the Continental Congress and help write the Declaration of Independence. Though Abigail Adams did not serve in Congress, she clearly followed politics. As her letters suggest, she possessed strong opinions on political issues and on women's political subordination to men. From their home in Massachusetts, Abigail Adams maintained a lively correspondence with her husband while he was in Philadelphia serving in the Continental Congress. In this letter, she suggests some of the limits of the patriots' commitment to liberty

Questions to Consider

- Who might Abigail have had in mind when she wondered about "those accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures [of liberty]"?

- In what did she ask John to "remember the Ladies"?

Document

I wish you would write me a letter half as long as I write you, and tell me if you may where your fleet have gone? What sort of defense Virginia can make against our common enemy? Whether it is so situated as to make an able defense? . . . I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be equally strong in the breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow creatures of theirs. Of this I am certain, that it is not founded upon that generous and Christian principle of doing to others as we would that others should do unto us. . . .

I long to hear that you have declared an independency, and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any such laws in which we have no voice, or representation. That your sex are naturally tyrannical is a truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity? Men of sense in all ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your sex. Regard us then as beings placed by providence under your protection and in imitation of the Supreme Being make use of that power only for our happiness.

Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776

Introduction

In his reply to his wife's letter, John Adams treated this sentiment as a joke, demonstrating the limits of revolutionary liberty.

Questions to Consider

- What does Adams say about how the Revolution has "loosened the bands" and affected different classes and people in society? How does he feel about these changes?
- What reasons does Adams give for not wanting to "exert our power in its full latitude" by granting more rights not only to women, but also to other groups?

As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government everywhere. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient--that schools and colleges were grown turbulent--that Indians slighted their guardians and Negroes grew insolent [disrespectful] to their masters. But your letter was the first intimation that another tribe more numerous and powerful than all the rest were grown discontented....

Depend upon it, we know better than to repeal our masculine system. Although they are in full force, you know they are little more than theory. We dare not exert our power in its full latitude. We are obliged to go fair, and softly, and in practice you know we are the subject. We have only the name of masters, and rather than give up this, which would completely subject us to the despotism of the petticoat, I hope General Washington, and all our braves heroes would fight...After stirring up Tories, Landjobbers, Trimmers, Bigots, Canadians, Indians, Negroes, Hanoverians, Hessians, Russians, Irish Roman Catholicks, Scotch Renegadoes, at last they have stimulated the to demand new Priviledges and threaten to rebel.

John Adams to James Sullivan, May 26, 1776

Introduction

Less than two months after Abigail Adams asked him to "remember the ladies," John Adams wrote the letter below to James Sullivan, a state court judge in Massachusetts and colleague of John Adams who was often sympathetic to those who thought women and non-elite men should have a voice in the new nation's government. Adams disagreed, explaining to Sullivan why women and the poor should be excluded. Some spelling changes and edits have been made to improve clarity.

Questions to Consider

- Why, according to Adams, did many men believe women should be barred from voting?
- What did Adams say about women's minds and judgment? Did it follow, then, that women should vote? Why or why not?

Document

It is certain in theory, that the only moral foundation of government is the consent of the people, but to what an extent shall we carry this principle? Shall we say, that every individual of the community, old and young, male and female, as well as rich and poor, must consent, expressly to every act of legislation?...

...Why exclude women? ...Because their delicacy renders them unfit for practice and experience, in the great business of life, and the hardy enterprises of

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war, as well as the arduous cares of state. Besides, their attention is so much engaged with the necessary nurture of their children, that nature has made them fittest for domestic cares. And children have not judgment or will of their own...

Depend upon it, sir, it is dangerous to open [such a] source of controversy and altercation, as would be opened by attempting to [change] the qualifications of voters. There will be no end of it. New claims will arise. Women will demand a vote. Lads from 12 to 21 will think their rights not enough attended to, and every man, who has not a [dime], will demand an equal voice with any other in all acts of state. It tends to confound and destroy all distinctions, and [surrender] all ranks, to one common level.

Introduction

In the desperate months of 1780 as General Washington was pleading with Congress and the states to provide adequate supplies for his soldiers, the First Lady of Pennsylvania, Esther De Berdt Reed, spearheaded a fundraising campaign with other influential Philadelphia women that raised \$300,000 for the Continental Army. As such, Reed is considered the likely author of this broadside, a one-page handbill published to promote, explain, and justify the women's campaign.

Questions to Consider

- Why would Reed have felt it wise to publish such a broadside? As the governor's wife, why did she publish it anonymously (not uncommon in the period)?
- To whom did she address her "sentiments"? How does she attempt to convince women to get involved in the war effort?

Document

On the commencement of actual war, the Women of America manifested a firm resolution to contribute as much as could depend on them to the deliverance of their country. Animated by the purest patriotism, they are sensible of sorrow at this day in not offering more than barren wishes for the success of so glorious a Revolution. They aspire to render themselves more really useful, and this sentiment is universal from the north to the south of the Thirteen United States....So many famous sieges where the Women have been seen forgetting the weakness of their sex,

building new walls, digging trenches with their feeble hands, furnishing arms to their defenders, they themselves darting the missile weapons on the enemy...throwing themselves into the flames rather than submit to the disgrace of humiliation before a proud enemy...The time is arrived to display the same sentiments which animated us at the beginning of the Revolution when we renounced the use of teas...when our republican and laborious hands spun the flax, prepared the linen intended for the use of our soldiers.. Let us not lose a moment; let us be engaged to offer the homage of our gratitude at the altar of military valor, and you, our brave deliverers, while mercenary slaves combat to cause you to share with them the irons with which they are loaded, receive with a free hand our offering, the purest which can be presented to your virtue,

BY AN AMERICAN WOMAN.

New Jersey Voting Act, 1790

Introduction

Most American men shared John Adams's reluctance to grant women the vote. No state explicitly allowed women to vote, and only New Jersey did so implicitly. The unique situation in New Jersey lasted until 1807, when the law was changed to exclude women.

Questions to Consider

- Who did the law allow to vote?
- Where does the law refer to women?
- Which women would be allowed to vote under this law?

Document

Qualifications of Voters. . . .

11. *And be it further Enacted*, That all free Inhabitants of this State of full Age, and who are worth Fifty Pounds Proclamation Money clear Estate in the same, and have resided within the County in which they claim a Vote, for twelve Months immediately preceding the Election, shall be entitled to vote for all public Officers which shall be elected by Virtue of this Act; and no Person shall be entitled to vote in any other Township or Precinct that that in which he or she doth

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actually reside at the Time of the Election; and no Person who shall be convicted of Treason against this State or the United States, or any of them, shall be entitled to vote at any such Election.

Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America

Introduction

Tocqueville was a French political thinker and historian who traveled to America in 1831 to study America's prison system. While in America, he became fascinated with democracy and consequently traveled around America for nine months searching for the essence of American democracy. The result of his travels and studies are the two volumes of Democracy in America. The following document is an excerpt from his second volume that discusses the role of women in American society and argues that although men and women do not have the same role in society; Americans "consider both of them as beings of equal value."

Questions to Consider

- According to Tocqueville, how does the treatment of and ideas about women in America differ from those in Europe?
- How did Americans' views of women affect the division of roles in American society?
- How were women in American society simultaneously inferior and superior to men? Why were they seen as important to society despite being barred from many political/social aspects of society?

Document

Chapter XII: How the Americans Understand the Equality of the Sexes

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Their [Americans'] conduct to women always implies that they suppose them to be virtuous and refined; and such is the respect entertained for the moral freedom of the sex that in the presence of a woman the most guarded language is used lest her ear should be offended by an expression. In America a young unmarried woman may alone and without fear undertake a long journey. The legislators of the United States, who have mitigated almost all the penalties of criminal law, still make rape a capital offense, and no crime is visited with more inexorable severity by public opinion. This may be accounted for; as the Americans can conceive nothing more precious than a woman's honor and nothing which ought so much to be respected as her independence, they hold that no punishment is too severe for the man who deprives her of them against her will. In France, where the same offense is visited with far milder penalties, it is frequently difficult to get a verdict from a jury against the prisoner. Is this a consequence of contempt of decency or contempt of women? I cannot but believe that it is a contempt of both.

Thus the Americans do not think that man and woman have either the duty or the right to perform the same offices, but they show an equal regard for both their respective parts; and though their lot is different, they consider both of them as beings of equal value. They do not give to the courage of woman the same form or the same direction as to that of man, but they never doubt her courage; and if they hold that man and his partner ought not always to exercise their intellect and understanding in the same manner, they at least believe the understanding of the one to be as sound as that of the other, and her intellect to be as clear.

Thus, then, while they have allowed the social inferiority of woman to continue, they have done all they could to raise her morally and intellectually to the level of man; and in this respect they appear to me to have excellently understood the true principle of democratic improvement. As for myself, I do not hesitate to avow that although the women of the United States are confined within the narrow circle of domestic life, and their situation is in some respects one of extreme dependence, I have nowhere seen woman occupying a loftier position; and if I were asked, now that I am drawing to the close of this work, in which I have spoken of so many important things done by the Americans, to what the singular prosperity and growing strength of that people ought mainly to be attributed, I should reply: To the superiority of their women.

Benjamin Rush on Women's Education

Introduction

Benjamin Rush, a patriot and scientist, played an active role in revolutionary politics and was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. He was best known, however, as a medical doctor and as one of the foremost scientists in the new United States. In addition, he was interested in articulating a philosophy of education appropriate to the United States. In 1786, as a trustee of a Young Ladies' Academy established in Philadelphia, he hoped to put his philosophy into practice. In this excerpt from a speech delivered at the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia, Rush highlights the distinctive responsibilities of women in a republic.

Questions to Consider

- Why, according to Rush, were traditional views about women's education unsuited to women in the United States?
- What kind of education did Rush advocate for American women? Why?
- What roles did Rush envision for women in American society?

Document

GENTLEMEN,

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I have yielded with diffidence to the solicitations of the Principal of the Academy, in undertaking to express my regard for the prosperity of this seminary of learning by submitting to your candor a few thoughts upon female education. The first remark that I shall make upon this subject is that female education should be accommodated to the state of society, manners, and government of the country in which it is conducted. This remark leads me at once to add that the education of young ladies in this country should be conducted upon principles very different from what it is in Great Britain and in some respects different from what it was when we were a part of a monarchical empire.

There are several circumstances in the situation, employments, and duties of women in America which require a peculiar mode of education.

III. ...A principal share of the instruction of children naturally devolves upon the women. It becomes us therefore to prepare them by a suitable education, for the discharge of this most important duty of mothers.

IV. The equal share that every citizen has in the liberty and the possible share he may have in the government of our country make it necessary that our ladies should be qualified to a certain degree, by a peculiar and suitable education, to concur in instructing their sons in the principles of liberty and government.

The branches of literature most essential for a young lady, in this country, appear to be,

I. A knowledge of the English language. She should not only read, but speak and spell it correctly...

II. Pleasure and interest conspire to make the writing of a fair and legible hand, a necessary branch of female education....

III. Some knowledge of figures and book-keeping is absolutely necessary to qualify a young lady for the duties which await her in this country....

V. Vocal music should never be neglected... Besides preparing her to join in that part of public worship which consists in psalmody, it will enable her to soothe the cares of domestic life.

VI. Dancing is by no means an improper branch of education for an American lady. It promotes health and renders the figure and motions of the body easy and agreeable... I conceive it to be an agreeable substitute for the ignoble pleasures of drinking, and gaming...



The illustration on the left appeared at the front of *The Lady's Magazine and Repository of Entertaining*, published in Philadelphia in 1792. The magazine contained excerpts from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which explicitly linked women's rights to the republican ideology of the American and French revolutions.

What sort of clothing are the women wearing? Why?

What does this sort of dress mean ideologically?

Do you think this imagery was empowering to women at the time? Why or why not?

In the engraving on the right, "Keep Within Compass," the first line of the small couplet at the top reads: "How blest the Maid whose bosom no headstrong passion knows."

What do the smaller pictures on the lower left and lower right suggest might happen to women who are passionate?

What is this engraving urging American women to do?

What does it suggest about the thinking and emotions of American men in the new republican era?



Engraving from *Lady's Magazine*, 1792