

WOMEN OF THE REVOLUTION

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The American Revolution promised a freedom from tyranny and a new sense of liberty for the colonists. Yet gendered constructs were consistently used to justify separation from Britain and to maintain social hierarchies. For example, Britain, portrayed as an effeminate mother, disrupted America's rise to manhood. In conjunction with this idea, and inverting sexuality, rape by British soldiers of American women became colonial propaganda used to instill patriotism and to encourage men to protect "their property and their wives."¹ Rather than portraying these accounts as physically and emotionally charged assaults on women, tales of rape by British soldiers were considered political and personal attacks on manly honor.² Even the heroic actions of women during the Revolution in the political and military spheres did not seem to significantly alter gender hierarchies. While white middle- and upper-class women, unlike their working-class, Native American, and African American sisters, achieved some gains, new political, cultural and scientific

1 Sharon Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 230-231.

2 Thomas A. Foster, *Sex and the Eighteenth-Century Man: Massachusetts and the History of Sexuality in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 63-64.

forces posed challenges to women's civic rights.³ This paper concentrates on historians' perspectives regarding the effects of the American Revolution on white women's political rights. While some historians note that the Revolution gave voice to women and allowed them to act in the political sphere, others contend that limitations on women's suffrage severely hampered women's political abilities and technically relegated women to the private sphere.

Mary Beth Norton, one of the major influences in modern American women's history, argues that the American Revolution allowed women legitimate access to the public sphere for the first time, giving them political recognition in a time of crisis. She cites how the Townshend Act of 1767 shaped their politic self-awareness as they responded to the boycott of tea advocated by newspaper essays and editors. While acquiescing to the demands of male colonial leaders, women signed agreements in the North and South ranging from avoiding British tea to total compliance with non-importation measures. Norton notes the Edenton Agreement signed by fifty-one North Carolinian ladies in 1774 as especially significant, for these females declared that they were compelled by the mandates of the provincial congress and were obligated to do whatever was necessary to support the cause of colonial society. She considers this a key point in American women's history, whereby females were beginning to transition from the private to the political arena.⁴

Yet Norton also acknowledges how men remained unaware of this shift, believing they could control and channel women's public actions.⁵ John Adams' response to his wife over her concern for national legal protection against husbands' tyranny

3 Pia Katarina Jakobsson, "Daughters of Liberty: Women and the American Revolution." In *Women's Rights: People and Perspectives*, ed. Crista DeLuzio (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010).

4 Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women* (Boston: Harper Collins, 1980), 157-61.

5 Norton, 163-69.

demonstrated how he wished to continue subjugating women. Norton further argues that patriot men did not understand that ladies' altering their consumption due to boycotts and spinning cloth instead of buying it from the British were not simply minor changes in womanly tasks but rather political choices to serve the colonial cause. Men joked about spinning bees, but these Daughters of Liberty engaged in making homespun cloth (under the direction of ministers) were making public declarations, working diligently and abstaining from foreign luxury to extoll the patriot cause.

Women followed their soldier husbands by washing dirty uniforms, cooking meals, and tending to the wounded, but Norton indicates these women were often so poor that they depended on meager army wages and their spouses' support. Most women managed and protected the family's finances, business, and home, gradually earning respect from their departed husbands for their skills to the point that decision-making patterns changed substantially upon men's return. Loyalist women usually had no choice about their decision to flee and left their homes, belongings, and friends when danger was imminent, moving to safer lands under British control.⁶

Finally, Norton illustrates how women, formerly meek about crossing gender lines, proudly protested financial and other grievances based upon their duties performed during the war.⁷ Women's sense of the "possible egalitarian resonances of revolutionary ideology showed an awareness of implications that seem to have escaped the notice of American men."⁸

Barbara Clark Smith argues that female food rioters during the American Revolution acted in accordance with Revolutionary ideals and local standards of social and economic

6 Norton, 212-13.

7 Norton, 225-26.

8 Norton, 227.

justice; denied formal political avenues, they nevertheless acted in a political manner.⁹ As Norton discusses, women engaged in the marketplace, and forms of economic action against the British were advocated by patriot newspaper contributors and colonial elites. Yet Smith notes that even during the war, in areas where patriot colonial authorities retained power, women participated heavily in food riots against suspected price gougers and food hoarders. Particularly in the rural north, they pushed for fair deals based on community standards of morality and reciprocity. Traditionally violators in colonial America could be subjected to the scrutiny or punishment of religious or civic authorities.¹⁰ Even in the thriving seaports, American society was still adjusting to commercialization, and the free market led to increased social inequality.¹¹

Britain's revenue raising policies towards the colonies after the French and Indian War heightened a sense of economic exploitation. Therefore, women's boycotts and spinning bees represented not only patriotic fervor, but also a sense of the propriety of fair and equitable business dealings.¹² When war profiteers sought to publicly endorse the repeal of price regulation as early as 1777, women and men repeatedly paid the price they thought appropriate, not the price posted.¹³ Ultimately, Smith proposes that the sheer number and extent of women's food riots during this period was revolutionary, and women were not afraid to invoke the revolution if necessary. Kingston women proposed hindering their male relatives from serving in the military if they did not get tea, New York women persuaded continental soldiers to assist them on at least one occasion, and female food rioters

9 Barbara Clark Smith, "Food Rioters and the American Revolution," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 51, no.1 (January 1994), 3-5.

10 Smith, "Food Rioters and the American Revolution," 9-10.

11 Smith, "Food Rioters and the American Revolution," 10.

12 Smith, "Food Rioters and the American Revolution," 13-14.

13 Smith, "Food Rioters and the American Revolution," 24-25.

spoke of the Continental Congress to convince others of their righteousness.¹⁴

Smith offers two reasons for why women invoked the Revolution and cast themselves into the traditionally male political sphere through food riots. First, in 1765 the colonial elite called for the masses to assist them in boycotting as a measure of defiance against the exploitative British. Second, in answering the call, women brought in their own notions of “equity, neighborly dealing, and charity,” and retained these values long after the elites lost interest.¹⁵ Unfortunately for women, the food or price riot was no longer pliable after the war, “due to suppression of popular cultural forms; the increasing disassociation (however inaccurate for many) of women and production; the growing association of women with consumption and leisure; the growing articulation of social experience into realms either ‘public’ or ‘private.’”¹⁶ According to Smith, the vote became the dominant form of political action after the war, suppressing all other mass political actions.¹⁷

Sara Evans states that white women worked within paradigms defined by colonial elites and Enlightenment philosophers to create a public role while subtly challenging conventional boundaries. She describes how the language of the Revolution was cast in gendered terms, as America the upright adolescent male struggled to achieve independence from Britain, the wicked mother.¹⁸ Even John Adams contrasted republican martial manliness with the “Elegance, Luxury, and Effeminacy” of Europe.¹⁹ With the tensions mounting between Britain and

14 Smith, “Food Rioters and the American Revolution,” 26-27.

15 Smith, “Food Rioters and the American Revolution,” 29.

16 Smith, “Food Rioters and the American Revolution,” 34.

17 Smith, “Food Rioters and the American Revolution,” 34.

18 Sarah M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), 47.

19 Evans, 47.

America in the 1760s, woman who acknowledged their effeminate timidity suddenly felt themselves drawn into the manly arena of politics. To enforce nonimportation and non-consumption of British goods, one colonial strategist advocated pulling women into the fray by urging them to adopt the boycott. Yet Evans reiterates Norton's evidence that women were often more than willing to participate, and also discusses how in 1780 Philadelphia women proposed to create a national women's organization to support the war effort. Their "Sentiments of an American Woman" attracted donations and promoted the creation of neighboring organizations in New Jersey, Maryland, and Virginia. However, General Washington denied them the agency to give the money directly to the soldiers, instead negotiating with them to make shirts.²⁰ Furthermore, General Washington did not fully appreciate the women who followed his army, even though they provided invaluable services.²¹

After the Revolution, Evans argues that male elites who read Enlightenment philosophers combined older modes of thought with modern ideas to form the nature of American government. Liberty applied as a concept for some but not for all. Jean-Jacque Rousseau influenced American elites with his insistence that only "a male head of a household" could be a citizen involved in the public sphere, while women with their gentle qualities belonged at home in the private sphere.²²

Evans insists that the notion of white propertied women as citizens presented a problem to white patriarchy. Therefore women were relegated to becoming republican mothers who would raise patriotic sons, with the benefit of training from female academies. The first Great Awakening had given women a public voice and Enlightenment writings promoted education as a prominent

20 Evans, 50.

21 Evans, 51-52.

22 Evans, 55-56.

role in the shaping of the mind. Yet women such as Mercy Otis Warren and Judith Sargent Murray embraced a paradigm that advocated women's education. Evans argues that women influenced by the second Great Awakening combined civic duty and moral obligation in their institutions, associations, and clubs of the early nineteenth century.²³ Furthermore, they challenged alcohol consumption, prostitution, slavery, and labor conditions in the public sphere, working collectively in a fashion which would eventually lead to demands for full political participation.²⁴ Thus, Evans argues against women historians' traditional definitions of politics as applying only to male suffrage, negating "women's action...as a distinctive activity in its own right."²⁵

Nancy Woloch disagrees with Evans that women managed to carve out a political voice through association even after the Revolution's end, and shares Smith's conviction that the early nineteenth century consigned women to a private, family sphere.²⁶ Woloch focuses on a "new, companionate ideal of marriage... based on sympathy, affection, self-esteem, friendship, and mutual obligation[,]” compared to an earlier harsh, patriarchal model.²⁷ Yet spinsterhood was considered less of a shunned circumstance, and some women in eastern areas used the newfound right to reject marriage offers to their advantage. Marriage was still the ideal, however, and many women of means attended institutions such as the Philadelphia Young Ladies Academy (1787) to fashion themselves as suitable republican wives and mothers.²⁸

Many advocates of education had other ideas than simply marriage. Judith Murray, Priscilla Mason, and the Englishwoman

23 Evans, 56-58, 64-66.

24 Evans, 74-75, 83-84, 92.

25 Evans, 5.

26 Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience: A Concise History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 35.

27 Woloch, 54.

28 Woloch, 57-58.

Mary Wollstonecraft felt that academies should help women in other ways besides their marriage prospects. Their ideas included equality, self-growth and confidence, economic independence, and even access to offices within Church and State.²⁹ Woloch notes that these notions did not come to full fruition in the early nineteenth century, but church-sponsored charity associations, ladies periodicals and literature, and women's work in the factories did expose women to changing circumstances. To Woloch, they signified portents of transitions to come, for the time was still not right.

Carol Berkin reiterates women's political participation in the Revolution, citing boycotts, spinning bees, laundering, nursing, cooking for the troops, even fighting as soldiers.³⁰ Yet she declares that "after the war, virtually no one suggested formalizing women's political participation, and women showed little interest in preserving the public platform that newspapers had provided."³¹ She argues that most women were happy to go back to traditional roles as wives and mothers.³²

Fortunately, the Revolution did offer some advantages to women. The Enlightenment and the actions of women during the Revolution dispelled the concept "that women were both morally and mentally inferior to men."³³ Berkin also argues that the resounding success of boarding schools and academies from northern to southern states disproved the concept that education would produce manly women uninterested in serving their families. Republican motherhood designed to instill civic virtue in patriotic sons became the norm. As a result, education for women

29 Woloch, 61-62.

30 Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), xv-xvi.

31 Berkin, xvii.

32 Berkin, xvii.

33 Berkin, 151.

became a symbol of status, not deficiency.³⁴

Unfortunately, according to Berkin this form of republican education confined women to the private, family sphere. She notes that Abigail Adams was not asking her husband, John, to include voting rights for women when creating new laws for the nation. She asked for rights that would give wives legal power, such as “the right to own or buy land, to sue or be sued, or to claim as her property the clothes on her back.”³⁵ For John Adams and other political elites, an attack on political patriarchy was laughable. Adam’s argument that men must retain the title of master and act decently toward women, for in fact women were really in control, does not sit well with Berkin. In fact she states that in “Adam’s claim that mastery was a burden rather than a privilege, we can see an eerie echo of the antebellum slave owner’s claim of the burdens of his patriarchy.”³⁶

The title of Rosemarie Zagarri’s book, *Revolutionary Backlash*, signifies her stance toward the Revolution’s contribution to women’s political rights. She claims that several factors influenced the changes that had occurred by the 1830s. “Whereas previously women had been excluded by custom and tradition, now their exclusion was legally required, scientifically mandated, and culturally determined.”³⁷ She notes how New Jersey experimented with female suffrage from 1797, but charges of voter fraud in Essex county in 1807 (observers supposedly saw males dressed as women voting several times) were used as an excuse by Democratic-Republicans and Federalists to disenfranchise both propertied women and free blacks. She considers this a “Faustian bargain,” for women had voted for Federalists, while

34 Berkin, 152-53.

35 Berkin, 157-58.

36 Berkin, 158.

37 Rosemarie Zagarri. *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 180.

blacks had voted for Republicans.³⁸ Even without female suffrage, partisan politics between the Federalists and Republicans initially spurred women into the fray, with men encouraging women to attend, participate, and speak at political meetings and events. Significantly, Zagarri argues that the early nation's hatred of partisan politics, and the violent ruptures that partisan politics eventually caused within families, communities, and the nation as a whole, stimulated many men to insist that women withdraw from partisan activities and act as "peacemakers and mediators" between male factions.³⁹ The rise of the concept of a public sphere for men and a private sphere for women joined with this notion of female nonpartisanship to encourage women to reject politics and join reform and charitable associations. With women explicitly disassociating their efforts from politics, Zagarri insists that gender lines were drawn.⁴⁰ Yet partisanship again played a role in keeping the notion of women's suffrage abominable, for when Republicans tried to remove property restrictions for white and some free black males, Federalists taunted them by asking why not include women, all blacks, and children. Responding to this assault, Republicans agreed that only white men should be able to vote, and by 1830 they were largely successful in establishing this stipulation throughout the nation. Zagarri argues that by expanding the vote for white males, the nation had formally established gender and racial hierarchies.⁴¹ New ideas coming from Europe stipulating the biological inferiority of both women and blacks contributed to this concept, and Enlightenment thinkers had also grouped blacks at the bottom of the racial hierarchy.

In conclusion, modern historians have debated the effects of the American Revolution on women's roles in the political

38 Zagarri, 36.

39 Zagarri, 146.

40 Zagarri, 147.

41 Zagarri, 149-154.

arena. Norton, Smith, and Evans note the positive effects for women in their ability to engage publicly in boycotts, homespun cloth, fundraising operations, charitable associations, and reform organizations. They note the political voice women manifested during the Revolution, the education of republican mothers after the Revolution, and the organizational activities in which women participated in the early nineteenth century. Women publicly challenged prostitution, alcoholism, slavery, and labor injustice, and these acts were inherently political. Yet Woloch, Berkin, and Zagarri indicate that while women developed confidence by working through these associations, females were relegated to a private sphere with no opportunity for voting rights. While they may have had a voice in society, the expansion of white male suffrage damaged their political clout. In some way this debate is between those who argue politics involves only the right to vote and those who claim politics includes any type of influence over legislative, executive, and judicial action.