Women and the American Revolution

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Anyone who teaches the history of the American Revolution faces a challenge: What do we say about the experience of the fifty percent of the population that was female when we talk about the political history of our nation? As we all know, the past several years have witnessed the growing conviction that we should teach a history that is more inclusive, that talks about what the most acerbic critics of the current curricula describe as something more than the history of dead white men. Those who have heeded this call have most often transformed their lessons by shifting the focus from political history to social history, from the most significant actions of an elite to the daily lives of the masses. Yet to make such a pedagogical move is also to offer a particular interpretation of history; it suggests a gap between daily experience and political action and in fact reinforces exactly the assumption—that history has been made by powerful white men upon powerless women, minorities, and poor people—that a more inclusive history should challenge. In order to integrate women into the history of the Revolution, then, we must address the question of power. We may ask the old questions, but we can address them in more inclusive ways. We might even return to Carl Becker's old question and ask how Revolutionary the war was. How did it affect the half of the population that was female? Focusing upon the position of women provides us with a method for addressing one of those questions historians love to pose: was the Revolution really a revolution, or was it merely a change of regime?

Let us begin with the conventional depictions of woman's place. Colonial Americans generally accepted hierarchical notions of social and political relations. It was believed, for example, that gentlemen were superior to yeomen, the free superior to slaves, and men superior to women. As a consequence, girls owed obedience to their fathers and—when they married—to their husbands. Although by the eighteenth century family relations were generally affectionate, with parents doting upon their children, and couples marrying not for money, but for love, it was everywhere believed that the father/husband was the head of the household. Indeed, when a woman married, she lost control of any property that she had owned as an individual; it became her husband's, to do with as he pleased. For this reason, marriages were to be entered into with some caution. Among the landed gentry, marriage settlements were negotiated with great care. Although young men and women were left free to select their own mates, parents retained a veto power, not to mention considerable powers of persuasion. Almost all persons married, at the time of the Revolution, white men typically in their early twenties, and women, a year or two earlier.

Married, a woman left her father's home for her husband's, exchanging one
sort of subordination for another. “Read often the Matrimonial Service,” the Virginia Gazette instructed women, “and overlook not the important word OBEY” (3). The substance of Thomas Jefferson’s instructions to his just-married daughter was pretty much the same: “The happiness of your life depends now on continuing to please a single person. To this all other objects must be secondary” (4).

Once married, a woman was expected to become a mother, and indeed, just as the vast majority of women married, so the vast majority of them bore children. On average, women would bear eight or nine children and hence spend most of their adult lives pregnant, nursing, or caring for a baby (5). Although women performed most of the work of childrearing, men held final responsibility for their offspring; indeed, childrearing manuals were addressed to fathers, or sometimes both parents, and not to mothers (6).

Although most women spent most of their lives keeping house and caring for their children, such activities were considered women’s work, their contributions to the household economy. There were other ways that women could contribute to the household economy, as well, and under certain conditions, such as the death of her husband, a woman might engage in a male occupation or activity. Women often served as inn and tavern keepers, and they sometimes became shopkeepers, as well. Perhaps the most prominent eighteenth-century Virginia businesswoman was Clementina Rind, who in 1773 became editor of the Virginia Gazette after the death of her previous editor/owner, her husband. In much the same way, women widows replaced their husbands as wire-workers, stonecutters, millers, tanners, shoemakers, and even, in Henrico County, Virginia, as proprietor of the county jail. Moreover, there were several occupations—midwifery, millinery, and mantua—making that were primarily female (7). Such women were clearly the exceptions, yet there was nothing in the way that colonial society thought about women that prevented the occasional female from engaging in these sorts of occupations.

Women’s education worked in much the same way. On the one hand, women’s education was far inferior to men’s, for women were thought to have no need of learning. As a consequence, female literacy lagged far behind that of men, with perhaps less than half of the white female population literate at the time of the Revolution, compared to eighty percent of the men (8). On the other hand, the occasional woman could become an intellectual without being accused of being un-feminine. Obvious examples include Anne Bradstreet, Judith Sargent Murray, and Lady Jean Skipwith of Mecklenburg Co., Virginia, whose library of more than eight hundred volumes was one of the greatest in colonial America (9).

One other point might be made about proper female demeanor: it was generally believed that women, especially those of the elite, were to be modest, retiring, chaste, and sweet. Nonetheless, there is abundant evidence that many women were bold and assertive. We have accounts of Virginia women who spoke back, went to cockfights, and travelled around the countryside unchaperoned. The William Byrd and Landon Carter diaries each provide portraits of difficult, unsubdued women. Another example, once again from Virginia, would be Hannah Lee Corbin, who in the 1760s became a Baptist and, after her husband died, lived with a man and bore him two children. Then, in 1778, she complained to her brother Richard Henry Lee that she was being taxed without representation; she believed that widows, at least, deserved the vote. Her brother agreed in principle, but the matter stopped there (10).

The Revolution would not make women full citizens of the new nation. The occasional outspoken woman—like Hannah Lee Corbin or Abigail Adams, who told her husband John to “remember the Ladies”—raised the issue of female citizenship, but it was not seriously considered. We could compare the direct effect of the Revolution upon the position of women to that of slaves, where the issue was raised forcefully, and to some effect. The anomaly of a war for independence that denied liberty to slaves was sufficiently obvious that it had to be addressed—in the tortured compromises and significant evasions of the Constitution, in the emancipation of slaves in the states north of the Mason-Dixon line, and ultimately, in the Civil War. By way of contrast, there was not even a national debate about the status of women (11).

Although there was no debate about woman’s inferior political position at the time of the Revolution, the consensus on woman’s nature shifted significantly, and this change is closely related to the ideology of the Revolution. As historians such as Bernard Bailyn and Gordon S. Wood have noted, many Revolutionaries subscribed to the republican tenet that the success of their new nation would rest upon the virtue of the citizenry, their capacity to sacrifice their own narrow self-interests for the good of the entire nation (12). As a result, one of the objectives of the Revolutionary movement was to develop and maintain the virtue of the citizenry. Women were assigned and claimed a role in this endeavor, not as citizens themselves, but through their influence upon men, principally as wives, but also as mothers. One magazine article stated that women had the power “to make our young men, not in

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empty words, but in deed and in truth, republicans” (13).

For women to be able to wield this sort of influence, they themselves would have to be virtuous. Until about the middle of the eighteenth century, women were considered morally weaker than men, and like their mother Eve, dangerously prone to sin. A number of forces would combine to alter this extremely negative evaluation of female nature; a more liberal and optimistic Protestantism, sentimentalism, and republicanism itself all began to depict womanhood more favorably. The rehabilitation of femininity was so radical and so rapid that by the turn of the century, some held out the hope that virtuous womanhood would redeem the entire nation, if not the whole world. If only women were properly educated so that they could exert their influence upon men, “then will the halyeon days dawn, and human nature appear in its highest beauty and perfection.” Female power was unlimited. “As Milton says,” another author explained, “the world lies all before them, and it is theirs to mould into what shape they please” (14).

This praise of woman’s capacities is so extravagant, so excessive that it cannot help raising our suspicions. Yet we must remember that republicanism included a streak of millenialism, and that the Revolution released wildly optimistic hopes about human, and not just feminine, potential (15). To a certain extent, Revolutionary thought simply “spilled over” onto women. Much of Revolutionary thought was, by its nature, universalizing; it proclaimed a single human nature and universal principles, applicable in all times and places, to all peoples of the world. It spoke in commonalities, such as all men are created equal, rather than differences. That is why it threatened slavery, after all. The millenialism of Revolutionary thought, like its egalitarianism, spilled over to women in a similar way; it attempted to incorporate women into its scheme for a new world order.

Had the implication of Revolutionary thought been followed to its logical outcome, sex roles in the United States would have been transformed radically. But so dramatic a reorganization of the social order was not among the Revolutionaries’ goals. As in all revolutions, the brakes would eventually be applied, but not before some important changes had been wrought in women’s lives and status. Revolutionary change reached its furthest point in New Jersey where, for more than a quarter of a century, unmarried women who met the property qualification were allowed to vote. Everywhere educational opportunities for women were expanded, and female literacy rose as a consequence (16). And, as we have already seen, the evaluation of women’s moral capacities changed dramatically. A number of women’s historians have concluded that these changes improved women’s lives and status significantly (17).

Yet there were other changes that were less positive. The range of women’s professional and work opportunities narrowed. Female shopkeepers, midwives, and newspaper editors became more rare, for such activities were increasingly defined as belonging to a separate and distinct male sphere. Moreover, the Constitution would rest American government on liberal, more than republican political principles. Although Americans still valued republican virtue, it was not a cornerstone in the governmental structure that Madison and his colleagues built. As Madison put it in The Federalist, No. 51, “If men were angels, no government would be necessary.” The term “virtue” began to lose the public meaning that republican thought had attached to it—self-sacrifice for the common good—and came to connote private virtues, such as sexual self-control, which we continue to associate with women (18). Private virtue, however much it was and is valued, is exercised in private; hence, women’s political role was necessarily circumscribed. They might exercise their influence on government indirectly, through their male relatives and friends, but they were not supposed to act on their own behalf.

Historians continue to debate whether these changes in women’s role and status,
which placed an increasing value upon women's private virtues and their domestic roles, but limited rather sharply their public and political roles, were a necessary outcome of the Revolution, or whether they were merely incidental. This is one of the most important questions currently facing women's historians and feminist political theorists: Does our democratic form of government rest upon the exclusion of women? The government that was created by the American Revolution clearly excluded women, but whether this outcome was the thwarting or realization of the Revolution's promise is the subject of continuing debate.

Endnotes