

Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence by Carol Berkin

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Introduction

Women played indispensable roles in the American Revolution as household managers, farmers, producers, political communicators, nurses, camp followers, spies, and sometimes combatants. The original essay correctly recognizes that women's contributions were essential and that war expanded some responsibilities. It overstates the claim that women's rights improved substantially after the Revolution and generalizes women's experiences without enough attention to race, class, region, and legal status. Revolutionary ideology created new arguments about liberty and citizenship, but married women remained subject to coverture, voting rights generally narrowed rather than expanded, slavery continued, and Indigenous women faced war and dispossession. The Revolution changed women's work and political consciousness more rapidly than it changed formal legal equality (Berkin, 2006).

Women Before the Revolution

Before independence, women's lives varied according to wealth, race, marital status, religion, location, and whether they were free or enslaved. In English colonial law, a married woman's legal identity was often incorporated into her husband's under coverture. She generally had limited independent control over property and contracts, although widows and single women possessed greater legal capacity.

Women performed substantial economic labor within households and communities. They produced food, clothing, candles, soap, and other goods, managed children and servants, worked in shops and farms, and participated in local exchange. The political system excluded them formally, but economic activity and social networks meant that women were never absent from public life.

Boycotts and Consumer Politics

Resistance to British taxation transformed household consumption into political action. Nonimportation agreements encouraged colonists to avoid British textiles, tea, and other goods. Because women often managed household purchasing and textile production, their decisions became

politically significant.

Women organized spinning gatherings, produced homespun cloth, and participated in boycotts. The Daughters of Liberty became a symbol of this involvement. Domestic work that had previously been treated as ordinary household duty could now be described as patriotic service.

Consumer politics also had limits. Wealthier households possessed more flexibility to choose substitutes, and political rhetoric sometimes praised women mainly because their sacrifice supported male-led resistance. Participation did not automatically produce equal political authority.

Homespun and Household Production

Homespun clothing carried political meaning because it reduced dependence on imported British textiles. Spinning and weaving were labor-intensive, and public celebrations of homespun could obscure the amount of women's work required.

The movement demonstrated that economic resistance depended on production as well as refusal to buy. A boycott is difficult to sustain when essential goods have no alternative source. Women's labor helped make nonimportation materially possible.

The Edenton Tea Party

In 1774, fifty-one women in Edenton, North Carolina, signed a statement supporting the boycott of British tea and cloth. The action became known as the Edenton Tea Party. It was significant because women publicly attached their names to a political commitment rather than acting only through household choices.

British satirists mocked the women for entering political affairs. The response reveals how female political participation challenged gender expectations even when the women framed their action as support for husbands, families, and colonial liberty.

Abigail Adams and "Remember the Ladies"

Abigail Adams's 1776 letter to John Adams is one of the most famous statements concerning women during the Revolution. She urged him to "remember the ladies" when creating new laws and warned against giving husbands unlimited power.

John Adams replied humorously and did not support equal political rights. The exchange demonstrates both the possibilities and limits of revolutionary language. If government required consent and opposed arbitrary power, women could ask why those principles stopped at the household. Yet leading revolutionaries were not prepared to apply political equality consistently

(Kerber, 1980; Norton, 1980).

Managing Farms and Businesses

As men left for military service, political office, imprisonment, or travel, women often assumed greater responsibility for farms, workshops, shops, accounts, tenants, and creditors. They made decisions that had previously been associated formally with husbands.

This work was essential to family survival and the wartime economy. It did not necessarily represent a permanent emancipation. When men returned, legal and social expectations often restored earlier authority patterns. The experience nevertheless demonstrated women's economic competence and expanded the range of tasks they had performed publicly.

Camp Followers

Thousands of women accompanied armies during the Revolution. The term "camp follower" can be misleading because it is sometimes used as though these women were merely dependents or sex workers. Many were soldiers' wives or relatives who cooked, washed clothing, carried water, nursed the sick, repaired garments, and performed other necessary labor.

Armies depended on these services while attempting to regulate the number and movement of women. Camp life exposed women and children to disease, hunger, weather, violence, and displacement. Their labor formed part of military logistics even when official records minimized it (Berkin, 2006).

Nursing and Medical Care

Women served as nurses in military hospitals and camps, caring for wounded and sick soldiers under dangerous conditions. Eighteenth-century medicine had limited ability to prevent infection, and epidemics could kill more soldiers than battle.

Nursing involved washing, feeding, cleaning, dressing wounds, and monitoring patients. Some women received pay or rations, while others worked through family obligation or local mobilization. Their experience contributed to the broader history of women's medical labor without establishing a modern professional nursing system.

Women in Combat

A small number of women participated directly in combat or military operations. Deborah Sampson

disguised herself as a man and served in the Continental Army. Margaret Corbin fought after her husband was killed at Fort Washington and later received government support for her disability.

Stories about “Molly Pitcher” represent a mixture of memory, legend, and the experiences of women who carried water or assisted artillery. Historians should distinguish documented individuals from later patriotic mythology. The rarity of women’s formal combat service makes these cases notable, but focusing only on exceptional fighters can obscure the far larger number who sustained armies through ordinary labor.

Spies and Intelligence

Women could carry messages, observe troop movement, overhear conversations, or hide information partly because military authorities did not always view them as political actors. This underestimation created opportunities for intelligence work.

Some spy stories are difficult to verify because secrecy produced limited records and later tradition embellished biographies. Reliable analysis should separate documented evidence from legends. The broader point remains that gender expectations could constrain women while also allowing them to move through spaces where male suspects received greater scrutiny.

Loyalist Women

Not every woman supported independence. Loyalist women defended the Crown, maintained households while male relatives fled or served British forces, petitioned for property, and sometimes experienced confiscation or exile.

The original essay treats women mainly as supporters of the Patriot cause. Including Loyalists prevents revolutionary history from becoming a single national story. Women made political choices across the conflict, and those choices affected family security and postwar status.

Enslaved African American Women

Enslaved women experienced the Revolution within a system that denied their freedom. War disrupted plantations and created opportunities for escape, but it also exposed people to sale, military seizure, violence, disease, and displacement.

British proclamations offering freedom to some enslaved people who left Patriot masters encouraged thousands to seek British lines. Eligibility and outcomes varied, and many people were re-enslaved or abandoned. Other African Americans supported the Patriot side in hopes of freedom or because circumstances constrained choice.

For enslaved women, liberty was not an abstract slogan. It involved control over body, family, labor, movement, and children. The continuation of slavery after independence revealed the contradiction between revolutionary ideals and American institutions.

Free Black Women

Free Black women participated in urban and rural economies, maintained families, and confronted racial discrimination that limited the meaning of revolutionary citizenship. Northern gradual-emancipation laws created changing communities but did not produce immediate equality.

Black women later built churches, mutual-aid organizations, abolitionist networks, and schools. These developments belong partly to the longer legacy of revolutionary language, although they should not be credited to the Revolution alone.

Indigenous Women

Indigenous nations faced invasion, alliance decisions, warfare, and territorial loss. Women's political and economic roles varied greatly among nations. In Haudenosaunee societies, clan mothers possessed important authority in kinship and leadership systems, challenging European assumptions that all women were politically subordinate.

The Revolution divided Indigenous communities and often resulted in destruction of villages and crops. Independence expanded U.S. pressure for western land. For many Indigenous women, the war did not represent liberation from British rule but a new stage of settler expansion.

German and Other Civilian Women

The original essay cites the journal of Baroness Frederika Charlotte Louise von Riedesel, who accompanied her husband, General Friedrich Riedesel, during the Saratoga campaign. Her account describes fear, wounded soldiers, children, shortages, and the experience of retreat and captivity.

Such firsthand accounts are valuable because they show war through domestic and medical spaces rather than only battlefield strategy. Riedesel was an elite German woman, so her perspective should not be treated as representative of every camp follower or civilian. It nonetheless expands the documentary record of women's wartime experience (Riedesel, n.d.).

Refugees and Displacement

War displaced families from contested towns, frontier settlements, and occupied regions. Women

often managed children and possessions during evacuation while facing food shortages and uncertain shelter.

Refugee experience differed by allegiance and race. Loyalist families could leave for Canada or Britain, enslaved families moved toward military lines, and Patriot households fled advancing armies. Displacement is an important part of women's war history because civilian survival required constant labor.

Political Writing

Women used letters, poems, plays, and essays to comment on the Revolution. Mercy Otis Warren wrote political satire and later a history of the Revolution. Correspondence among women recorded political opinion, household conditions, prices, military news, and family strategy.

Writing allowed some educated women to enter political debate without formal office. Access to literacy and publication was unequal, so surviving texts disproportionately represent white women with resources.

Republican Motherhood

After independence, the concept later called republican motherhood emphasized women's responsibility to raise virtuous, informed citizens. This ideology supported arguments for women's education because mothers were expected to educate sons who would participate in the republic.

The concept expanded the civic importance of women's domestic role but did not establish equal citizenship. It could reinforce the idea that women's political contribution should occur indirectly through husbands and children. Its legacy is therefore both enabling and restrictive (Kerber, 1980).

Education

The postwar period saw growing support in some regions for female education, including academies for young women. Advocates argued that literacy and knowledge improved motherhood, morality, and companionship.

Educational expansion created opportunities that later reform movements could use, yet access remained unequal by class, race, and location. Enslaved women were widely denied literacy through law or coercion, while Indigenous education was increasingly entangled with assimilation policy.

Property and Coverture

The Revolution did not abolish coverture. Married women generally remained limited in property ownership, contracts, and independent legal identity. Widows and single women had greater capacity, and state laws varied.

Major married-women's property reforms developed later in the nineteenth century. The revolutionary era contributed ideological language about rights, but formal economic independence required additional political struggle.

Voting Rights

Women did not gain national suffrage after the Revolution. New Jersey's early constitution used property-based language that allowed some propertied women to vote, but the state explicitly limited voting to white male citizens in 1807.

The episode shows that female voting was not unimaginable, yet the post-revolutionary trend did not move steadily toward equality. The Nineteenth Amendment would not prohibit sex-based denial of voting rights until 1920, and racial barriers continued to restrict many women afterward.

Marriage and Divorce

Revolutionary ideals of consent influenced discussion of marriage, and divorce became somewhat more available in parts of the new nation. Change varied by state and remained constrained.

Women's dependence on marriage was reinforced by property law and limited employment options. Personal liberty therefore cannot be evaluated only through formal divorce statutes.

Economic Conditions After the War

War produced debt, inflation, damaged property, disrupted trade, and family loss. Women who had managed farms or businesses during men's absence sometimes continued those responsibilities, while others returned to earlier gender divisions.

Widows faced particular challenges when husbands died without adequate property or pensions. Veterans' benefits and relief systems developed unevenly. Economic survival remained one of the most immediate postwar concerns.

Women and Veterans' Pensions

Later pension laws allowed some widows of Revolutionary soldiers to claim benefits. Pension applications became valuable historical sources because women described marriages, military service, family history, and local witnesses.

These records demonstrate how women interacted with the federal state decades after the war. They also reveal how access to benefits depended on documentation that poor or mobile families might lack.

Memory and Commemoration

Nineteenth-century patriotic memory often celebrated women as self-sacrificing mothers, wives, or heroines. These stories helped build national identity but could simplify political disagreement and racial inequality.

Commemoration should recover ordinary labor as well as exceptional figures. Producing food, caring for children, nursing soldiers, managing farms, and surviving displacement were not secondary to war; they enabled military and political institutions to continue.

Did the Revolution Improve Women's Rights?

The answer depends on the right and the group. Revolutionary ideology expanded discussion of women's civic role and contributed to educational opportunity. Wartime responsibility demonstrated competence beyond narrow domestic expectations.

However, married women remained under coverture, political rights were extremely limited, slavery continued, and Indigenous communities lost land and security. It is therefore inaccurate to describe the Revolution as direct legal emancipation for women.

Long-Term Influence

Later women's-rights activists used American principles of equality and consent to challenge exclusion. The 1848 Seneca Falls Declaration deliberately echoed the Declaration of Independence. Revolutionary language provided a vocabulary that could be turned against institutions the founders had left unchanged.

This is an indirect legacy rather than proof that the Revolution contained a completed feminist program. Political ideals can have consequences their original authors did not intend.

Why Women's History Changes the Revolution

Including women changes the scale and meaning of the Revolution. The conflict becomes not only a series of battles and political declarations but a transformation of households, labor, markets, migration, and social identity.

It also reveals contradictions. Patriot women could demand liberty while living within slaveholding households. Men could oppose arbitrary British power while retaining legal authority over wives. Understanding these contradictions produces a more accurate history than simply adding a list of famous women to a male-centered narrative.

Sources and Historical Method

Historians reconstruct women's experiences through letters, diaries, newspapers, court records, pension files, military accounts, household records, petitions, and material culture. The archive is unequal because literate and wealthy people left more written material.

Silence in the archive does not mean absence from history. Researchers must read institutional records critically and avoid inventing detail when evidence is missing.

Conclusion

Women were essential participants in the American Revolution as producers, boycotters, household managers, nurses, camp followers, political writers, spies, refugees, and occasional soldiers. Abigail Adams and the Edenton women made political claims publicly, while thousands of less documented women sustained families and armies (Berkin, 2006).

Their experiences were not uniform. Enslaved women confronted the contradiction between independence and slavery, Indigenous women faced warfare and settler expansion, Loyalist women endured confiscation and exile, and class shaped access to safety and influence (Riedesel, n.d.).

The Revolution expanded women's responsibilities and helped create new arguments about education and civic virtue, but it did not establish broad legal or political equality. Coverture survived, voting remained overwhelmingly male, and later generations had to transform revolutionary language into claims the founding generation had not fulfilled (Kerber, 1980; Norton, 1980).

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