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# Patriots in the Kitchen

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## The Role of Republican Motherhood in Jeffersonian America

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within their own households. Women remained politically weak despite growing influence from female education activists like Abigail Adams and Judith Sargent Murray, yet republican motherhood provided women limited purpose and for a short time the “problem of female citizenship was solved by endowing domesticity itself with political meaning”.<sup>4</sup>

Sparked by fresh and compelling ideologies concerning independence, equality and republicanism, American women during the Revolution created a paradigm shift concerning equality. In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson declared the famous yet ambiguous phrase, “all men are created equal” and in turn revolutionized previously existing ideals about the role of women in society.<sup>1</sup> However, Jefferson strongly opposed the Enlightenment theory of equality as extended to women and held firmly to the belief that women should be excluded from public life and confined to their role in the home.<sup>2</sup> Jefferson went so far as to argue that nature “marked infants and the weaker sex for the protection rather than the direction of government.”<sup>3</sup>

While women did not gain political office during the Revolutionary era, they purposefully influenced the political culture of the day. Republican motherhood, or the cultivation of republicanism in the home, was honored and esteemed as a valuable political action. Society no longer denied women any thoughts about politics, in fact, women fostered those very patriotic attitudes

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Jefferson, “The Declaration of Independence,” in the Charters of Freedom (The National Archives), [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html) (accessed 27 March 2008).

<sup>2</sup>Jon Kukla, *Mr. Jefferson's Women* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 177; Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 28.

<sup>3</sup>Kukla, *Mr. Jefferson's Women*, 177.

<sup>4</sup>Sarah M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), 57, 64.

Everyone, including men, women, children, statesmen and farmers, was swept up in the excitement of the Revolution. Women, whose primary concern was within the home, now found themselves discussing politics and the status of liberty.<sup>5</sup> Men during the Revolutionary era tolerated women's discussion of political matters, however the extent of women's political participation remained debatable. Abigail Adams, the outspoken wife of President John Adams, overwhelmingly embraced the ideals of equality in the new Republic by demanding parity for women. Along with Judith Sargent Murray, Adams demanded equal education for her sex.<sup>6</sup> The views of such forthright women like Adams and Murray concerning equality and the roles of the sexes, considered extremely radical before the Revolution, found more acceptance after Independence.<sup>7</sup>

While the Revolutionary era left women lacking full equal rights, the argument for better female education gained more support. For example, Adams convincingly claimed that an intellectual woman was much more likely than an uneducated one to hold the affections of a man.<sup>8</sup> Concurrently, Murray contended that female education was the key to securing equal rights and that inequality in education caused the disjoint between the sexes. She noted, "Are we deficient in reason? We can only reason from what we know, and if opportunity of acquiring knowledge hath been denied us, the inferiority of our sex cannot fairly be deduced from thence."<sup>9</sup> A fair shot at education was the key to social uplift and security for women. Murray insisted that education could "lay the foundation for independence" and "undermine the dependent economic status of women in marriage by enabling them to achieve an independent livelihood and give women the intellectual independence necessary for sound political judgment."<sup>10</sup>

Even though the intriguing prospect of equality for women emerged through the call from Adams and Murray for fair education, old standards of gender inequality remained. Jefferson himself commented about education for women and supported it only to the extent of training women in their role as republican mothers. In a letter to Nathaniel Burwell on March 14, 1818, Jefferson quipped, "I thought it essential to give [my daughters] a solid education, which might enable them, when become mothers, to educate their own daughters, and even to direct the course for sons, should their fathers be lost, or incapable, or

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>6</sup> Cokie Roberts, *Founding Mothers: The Women Who Raised Our Nation* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 2004), 150.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 252.

<sup>8</sup> Kukla, *Mr. Jefferson's Women*, 143.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Sargent Murray, "On the Equality of the Sexes" in *Dissent in America: The Voices that Shaped a Nation* by Ralph F. Young, (New York: Pearson Education Inc., 2006), 109.

<sup>10</sup> Clare A. Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2006), 242.

inattentive.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, in the eyes of the dominant men of the era, weaving politics into women’s domestic lives remained the only acceptable outlet for female education.

Republican motherhood boosted the campaign for female education because raising children to be good citizens required certain knowledge. Now that women served a greater political purpose in the home, they needed proper education to fulfill their republican duty. Education for women was not intended to completely change women’s domestic duties but was rather meant to transform their traditional roles into having more of a political impact in the home.<sup>12</sup> The notion of republican motherhood changed forever the way women viewed themselves and their influence on society. A republican mother found responsibility in bringing up her sons to be competent and committed citizens. This provided women with a civic role separate from their husbands yet almost as important. Thus women’s political actions were directed back into the home.<sup>13</sup>

Through republican motherhood, American women proactively embraced the revolutionary struggle alongside their male counterparts. Women understood that they would have a greater role in the new nation by raising patriotic children and by providing assistance on the home front during the Revolutionary War. Women acted as nurses, cooks, and laundresses while a rare few even participated as spies or disguised themselves as soldiers.<sup>14</sup> For example, their active resistance to the Stamp Act followed by numerous boycotts as well as women’s willingness in allowing their sons and husbands to leave home for the battlefield shows women’s instrumental play in the politics of the day.<sup>15</sup> Many women volunteered to bear the workload in their homes to support family members fighting for the cause of liberty.<sup>16</sup> ‘A Planter’s Wife’ from South Carolina summarized in an essay in the *Virginia Gazette*, “we shall disappoint our enemies (who no doubt build much on our weakness in this respect) and greatly assist our husbands, brethren, and countrymen, in this their arduous struggle.”<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the middle class republican mothers, the women in the upper echelons of society exhibited an expanded role in politics as well but did so in a slightly different manner. “Unlike their more lurid political sisters, these women acted not as femme fatales

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to Nathaniel Burwell, March 14, 1818,” in *The Essential Jefferson*, ed. Jean M. Yarbrough, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2006), 247.

<sup>12</sup> Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 58.

<sup>13</sup> Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 57.

<sup>14</sup> Kukla, *Mr. Jefferson’s Women*, 168.

<sup>15</sup> Rosemarie Zagari, “Women and Party Conflict in the Early Republic,” in *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic* ed. Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 109.

<sup>16</sup> Kukla, *Mr. Jefferson’s Women*, 169.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 168.

but as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters. Like other women on farms and in shops, they participated in the family business – in this case, however, the family business was politics.”<sup>18</sup> The women in the capital city for example, helped forge it into the power it is today. They found themselves actively socializing and politicking in all areas of society, including inaugurations, churches, the galleries of Congress, and the congressional library.<sup>19</sup> While Jefferson himself was uncomfortable with and opposed to the manipulation of elite women in the realm of politics, he could not keep women out of Washington. They brought their own style of politicking rooted in family connections and social events.<sup>20</sup> “[This] demonstrate[d] that a smoke-filled backroom and a lady’s parlor are both political spaces. Ultimately, the story of Washington women profoundly change[d] the political history of the early Republic.”<sup>21</sup>

Hence, the wives of the founding fathers played an important role in politics, especially diplomacy, where they created their own unique social customs involving some of the most influential people in the world. Even though women were still expected to focus their attention on home life, there is no doubt that they exercised considerable influence in politics.<sup>22</sup> This shows that women desired an increased role in public life and infiltrated the ‘world of men’ as often as they could mainly through social events. In the end however, the idea of republican motherhood replaced this zeal for direct political influence with an indirect form of patriotism. A gap still existed between the rights women desired and their actual political liberties.

The sentiments of the Revolution stretched to influence all areas of society and women were among those who conceived an expanded role in the newly formed republic by embracing the language of equality set forth in the Declaration of Independence. Some women insisted upon their participation in political matters. Sarah M. Evans, in her study of the history of women entitled *Born for Liberty*, summarized, “In the intense atmosphere of the Revolution women were inevitably politicized, and they imbibed powerful ideas about human rights and liberties. Republican mothers gained a new status that was both political and domestic, filled with contradiction and possibility.”

Even though the American Revolution introduced new ideas concerning equality and freedom, a movement for women’s rights proved limited. Women could neither vote (except in New Jersey for a limited time) nor hold political office.<sup>23</sup> Despite the new ideals, women’s roles remained subordinate to men.<sup>24</sup> Particularly in marriage, women’s subordination

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<sup>18</sup> Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 21,47.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Roberts, *Founding Mothers*, 160.

<sup>23</sup> Zagarri, “Women and Party Conflict in the Early Republic, 107.

<sup>24</sup> Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 238.

subjected them to unequal citizenship rights where their political status was often determined by their marital status.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, society pushed women out of participation in political life as America progressed after the Revolution. Women's political aspirations were left only partially fulfilled through women's roles as republican mothers. Influencing sons and husbands of the republic remained the sole purpose of a woman's education.<sup>26</sup> Resulting from women too actively seeking participation in politics, the separate spheres philosophy that emerged after the revolutionary era attempted to permanently differentiate responsibility for men and women. Men would remain responsible for politics while women would only assume responsibility for society.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the increased pigeonholing of the philosophy of republican motherhood, the Revolution permanently changed the role of women. Women now viewed themselves as integral actors in the drama of republicanism. Even though complete equality remained elusive for women, republican motherhood partially sufficed for their political desires. While older, more traditional concepts about hierarchy persisted in American society through the enforcement of republican motherhood upon women's desire for equality, women in Jeffersonian America generally embraced that role and forever influenced the new nation.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 238.

<sup>26</sup> Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 180.

<sup>27</sup> Zagari, "Women and Party Conflict in the Early Republic", 122.

## Annotated Bibliography

Allgor, Catherine. *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000.

In this interesting synopsis, Allgor documents how women used the social sphere to solidify the new nation's politics, especially in the eyes of European countries. *Parlor Politics* emphasizes how some influential women viewed their role in the new republic as an important one but contributed very differently than their male contemporaries.

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

In her four-hundred page analysis, Evans attempts an explanation of the history of womanhood from pre-colonial times to the modern era. She proposes an extensive report of the ways, causes, and effects of changes throughout women's existence in American in a comprehensive yet detailed manner. The chapter entitled, "But What Have I to Do with Politicks? – the Revolutionary Era" presents accurate and useful information about women in Jeffersonian America.

Jefferson, Thomas. "The Declaration of Independence." in *The Charters of Freedom* in the National Archives. [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html). (accessed 27 March 2008).

Jefferson, Thomas. "Letter to Nathaniel Burwell, March 14, 1818" in *The Essential Jefferson*, ed. Jean M. Yarbrough. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2006.

This book contains excerpts of entire texts from Thomas Jefferson's most famous and influential writings. His letter to Nathaniel Burwell specifically addresses education for women and leaves no question that Jefferson rarely considered or supported the prospect.

Kukla, Jon. *Mr. Jefferson's Women*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007.

In this recent scholarship, Kukla researches Jefferson's exploits with several different women over his lifetime revealing interesting insights about the founding father. More importantly, Kukla describes Jefferson's views towards women in post-revolution America and gives greater understanding to the phrase "all men are created equal."

Lyons, Clare A. *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2006.

Lyons analyzes the causes and effects of sex in colonial and revolutionary Philadelphia. While at times a taboo subject, the sex lives of Philadelphians offer interesting insight into the culture of the time and how it shaped society. Of particular interest to this research query is the chapter entitled, "Sex and the Politics of Gender in the Age of Revolution" because it provides clarity into the politics of gender at the time.

Murray, Judith Sargent. "On the Equality of the Sexes" in *Dissent in America: The Voices that Shaped a Nation*, by Ralph E. Young. New York: Pearson Education Inc., 2006.

This comprehensive collection of speeches, sermons, arguments, articles, letters, and songs chronicles the thoughts and opinions of countless people throughout America's four-hundred year history, from the pre-Revolution period to the Iraq War. Young focuses on dissenting opinions and as a result, puts names and ideas behind the shaping of our nation. Of particular importance to this study on women in Jeffersonian America is Judith Sargent Murray's "On the Equality of the Sexes," and Abigail Adams' letters to her husband John, both which offer startling insight into the intricacies of feminism at the time of America's founding.

Roberts, Cokie. *Founding Mothers: The Women Who Raised Our Nation*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 2004.

Roberts explains the role of women during the Revolution and how they influenced the founding of American society. Fascinated by the women who had the ear of the Founding Fathers, Roberts provides entertaining insight into the female actions taken at our nation's foundation. The timeline, 1774-1789, is a perfect frame of reference for this study on women in Jeffersonian America. While the book written in a storytelling fashion, it offers useful information.

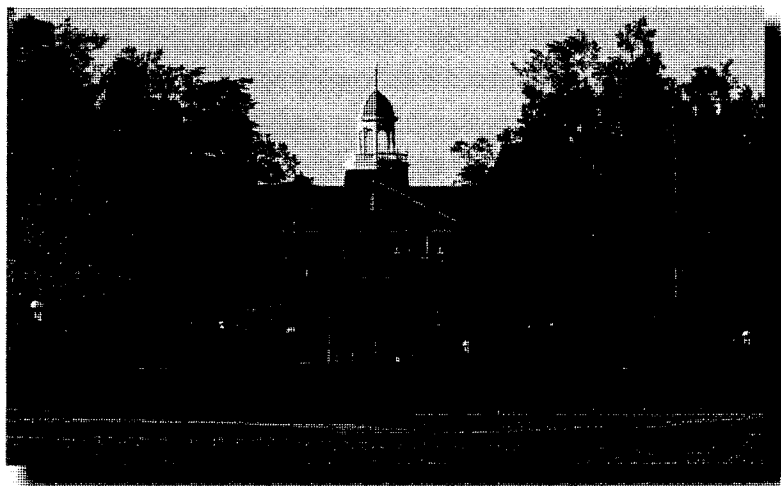
Zagarri, Rosemarie. "Women and Party Conflict in the Early Republic" in *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic*. Ed. Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

This collection of essays and articles shares a narrative of politics in the age of Revolution. The most useful article entitled, "Women and Party Conflict in the Early Republic" by Rosemarie Zagarri clearly discusses the role of women in politics at the start of the American Republic and presents arguments about the creation of separate spheres for men and women – a concept that took precedence in society for generations to come.

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