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# Battle Lines of the Home

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## The Impact of the Revolutionary War on the Shifting Roles of Women in the Jeffersonian Era

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In the years during and after the Revolutionary War, Americans were searching for normality. Newfound faith and excitement about being independent sent many Americans into uncharted territory. They struggled to define the rights of every man, and determine the roles of every woman. Though many supported the idea of all men being created equal, it was clear through societal expectations that this message excluded women. Instead, women were left to find their own place in the new world. Some retreated to traditional roles that had been practiced in Europe, while others struggled to create new places for themselves in society. No matter which path a woman chose, she faced obstacles to fit into society, and prove her worth.

In the early years of the United States, women were given two things to aspire to: marriage and motherhood. Sexual roles of men and women were held over as a vestige of the European life that many left behind to live in America.<sup>1</sup> A woman's financial rights and abilities would have made it difficult for her to choose a life without marriage.

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In the mid to late 18<sup>th</sup> century, most people lived on farms where they would grow their own food and produce their own materials.<sup>2</sup> Though there was a fair amount of trade going on as well, families primarily depended on themselves to provide for their needs. During this time, women were most importantly needed to be child bearing. Thomas Jefferson once remarked, "I consider a woman who brings a child every two years as more profitable than the best man on the farm."<sup>3</sup> Large families were regarded with honor, the sign of a devout wife and a successful husband. Also, children were needed to work on the farm, so it was not uncommon for couples to have nearly a dozen children.<sup>4</sup> Women's lives were, for the most part, controlled by their gestation cycles.

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy F. Cott, *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 123.

<sup>2</sup> Cott, 115.

<sup>3</sup> Cott, 166.

<sup>4</sup> Cott, 117.

Though many women were happy to stick to these traditional roles, an increasing number of women were growing discontent with the roles that society had formed for them. During the day their husbands would travel into cities like Boston or Philadelphia, where they would interact with adults, getting the latest political, business and societal gossip. Women however, were practically imprisoned in their own homes. Their domestic responsibilities, distance from neighbors and limited means of transportation resulted in a large number of lonely, isolated housewives. Soon, one major event helped to give women more opportunities for work and interaction outside of the domestic realm. These opportunities would lead to new concepts of what it meant to be an American woman.

Prior to the Revolutionary War, most conflict had been over land disputes.<sup>5</sup> In the 1770s, for the first time, many Americans began to form opinions about the political decisions that were being made. As support for independence grew, women were expected to participate in politics in some way. Newspaper essays encouraged women to take part in the boycotts of English goods such as tea and clothing.<sup>6</sup> Some women participated in spinning bees, where groups of females would spin their own clothing instead of importing the higher quality material from Britain. "As I am (as we say) a daughter of Liberty, I chuse to wear as much of our own manufactory as possible," wrote a thirteen-year-old Anna green Winslow in her journal in 1771.<sup>7</sup> The importance of the women's demonstrations was made especially significant when prominent men and women appeared in public in homespun clothing.<sup>8</sup>

This political activism gave women the opportunity to express their thoughts on equality. It also allowed them to participate politically, which empowered them. After taking part in spinning bees and boycotts, women couldn't help but to have political thoughts and feelings. The encouragement from newspapers to be politically concerned also helped to set the stage for a medium that women used to promote, and refute, their cause throughout the period.

During this time, Abigail Adams made one of the first recorded statements regarding women's rights. In a letter to John Adams she writes, "... 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 favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power in the hands of the Husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could ...."<sup>9</sup> This statement reflects the new role that woman had begun to form for themselves. Abigail is clear that she does not wish to see women treated as secondary anymore, but rather on closer – or even equal – footing as men.

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<sup>5</sup> Cott, 132.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *Major Problems in American Women's History*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 88.

<sup>7</sup> Cott, 136.

<sup>8</sup> Cott, 135.

<sup>9</sup> Norton, 70.

When the men went off to fight in the Revolutionary War, women naturally had to take over more responsibility at home. Husbands were sometimes gone for months or years at a time, during which the wife had to act as the head of the household and conduct business matters.<sup>10</sup> There are many accounts of women weren't able to speak with their husband about business matters prior to the revolutionary war, but who were treated more as partners afterwards.

As more ground was being made on the domestic front, women were also stepping out of their domestic roles and onto the battle field. Some women traveled with troops to assist as cooks, nurses and laundresses.<sup>11</sup> These jobs were wage-earning and gave many single women the chance to earn a living. A few women rejected stereotypical women's jobs altogether as they took on men's jobs instead. One example is Mary Hays McCauley, who was carrying water to her husband during a battle when he fell. She stationed herself at his cannon and fought in his position for the remainder of the battle.<sup>12</sup>

To support troops, women also formed organizations through which they would raise money and make clothing. For the first time in America, women formed clubs and came together socially on a regular basis. At the group gatherings women began to see themselves as stronger in a group than as individuals – a sentiment that will carry over through the women's suffrage movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Stories of these women's groups were run in many newspapers, which heightened the importance of these meetings.<sup>13</sup> An article about spinning bees in the *Boston Evening Post* read, "the ladies, while they vie with each other in skill and industry in their profitable employment, may vie with men in contributing to the preservation and prosperity of their country and equally share in the honor of it."<sup>14</sup> Such statements allowed women to be prideful in their newfound status.

At the end of the war, echoes of revolutionary ideology reverberated as women fought to gain equality. "I have paid my taxes and have not been Personally, or Virtually represented. My property is taken from me and I have no redress," wrote Mary Willing Byrd.<sup>15</sup> Byrd, along with many of her peers, used similar language that was used by revolutionaries. This tactic would have been especially powerful because it called upon men to realize that they were being as oppressive on women as the British Empire had been on America.

The end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century brought about a new forum where women could discuss issues of equality and women's rights: women's magazines. Though women's magazines existed prior to the turn of the century, they began to pick up in popularity during the 1800s

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<sup>10</sup> Norton, 92.

<sup>11</sup> Cott, 143.

<sup>12</sup> Cott, 145.

<sup>13</sup> Norton, 89.

<sup>14</sup> Boston Evening Press, Quoted in Norton, 90.

<sup>15</sup> Norton, 95.

because of large educational advances made on women's behalf in the previous century. The first issue of the *Lady's Magazine and Repository of Entertaining Knowledge* featured an illustration that spoke directly to the issues American women were facing. In the illustration, a woman is presenting a copy of a petition called "The Rights of Women" to a figure of Liberty.<sup>16</sup> It captures the mood of what women during the Jeffersonian era were dealing with. In the face of a changing nation and fluid laws, women were being given the perfect opportunity to reinvent their role in society. Though not all were open to the change, many went on to embrace it.

Though women's magazines often helped to encourage women to strive for new things, some traditional pressures were also a part of the publications. Extensive coverage of fashion trends, cooking recipes and tips on "how to be a good wife" filled the majority of the pages of many magazines.<sup>17</sup> Some editorials encouraged women to embrace their domestic roles because it was "for the good of America."<sup>18</sup>

Despite the new opportunities that were being made for women, some analysts believe that the sexism may have only gotten worse following the American Revolution. These authors say that the war provided women with a false sense of improvement, when really they were only being promoted socially and given more responsibility out of necessity because of the war. After the war, as the population grew and the commercial economy flourished, many women were sent back to their oppressed roles, stripped of the freedom and power they had experienced during wartime.<sup>19</sup>

However even if gender roles were not altered until later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Revolutionary War still worked as a conversation starter among women. Between 1774 and 1826 women joined together in women's organizations and began to learn the power of the press. Using both their social networks and the press, women would eventually go onto redefine what it meant to be a woman in America. They also used the value sets created during the struggle for independence in their own cause. Representation, equality and freedom were key reasons the Americans fought the British – and also the centerpiece of what women wanted from their new country.

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<sup>16</sup> *Lady's Magazine of Repository of Entertaining Knowledge*, (Philadelphia: W. Gibbons, 1792-93 ), 1792.

<sup>17</sup> "The Likeliest Way to Obtain a Good Husband," *Providence Gazette; and Country Journal*, January 6 1770.

<sup>18</sup> Cott, 148.

<sup>19</sup> Norton, 77.

## Annotated Bibliography

Bartlett, Virginia K., Keeping House: Women's Lives in Western Pennsylvania, 1st ed, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994.

Keeping House outlines the daily lives of women who lived both on the frontier and in the urban areas of Western Pennsylvania. The book touched on the differences of roles between women who lived in these two regions. It also helped to understand the place of a woman in her home. The division of labor and intellectual value was stressed.

Cott, Nancy F., No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 109-236.

This book is a collection of essays that outline the history of American women through specified periods of history. It provides first-hand accounts from diaries and letters of women, as well as detailed analysis by many of the assorted authors. In this book I primarily used the chapters: The Limits of Independence: 1760-1800 and Breaking New Ground: 1800-1848. The detailed depictions of women's daily life was particularly useful for background information. An extensive amount of material about women's roles during the Revolutionary War also helped provide a foundation for much of my essay.

Norton, Mary Beth, and Ruth M. Alexander. Major Problems in American Women's History. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003.

Major Problems in American Women's History is a collection of side-by-side primary documents and secondary essays. It provides many point, counter-point essays that serve to give a balanced view of historical occurrences. Essays by Joan Hoff and Mary Beth Norton analyzed why the revolutionary war was and was not a progressive time for women's roles in society. First hand documents such as the letter between Abigail Adams and John Adams and diary entries of men who are commenting on the role of women give detailed accounts about what was on the minds of Americans during the Jeffersonian period.

Sheldon, Garrett Ward., The Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

This book sorts through conflicting accounts and theories about political philosophies of Thomas Jefferson. Though some argue he was a Lockean liberal, others think he was a classic republican. Sheldon makes sense of the conflict in this text which analyzed Jefferson's views on many issues including slavery, women's issues, Christian ethics and democracy.

“The Story of Hannah Snell,” South-Carolina Gazette, 8 October 1750.

This newspaper article is about a woman named Hannah Snell who posed as a man so that she could join the marines. In the end she spent seven years in the Marine Regiment, and her sex was never discovered by any of her fellow marines. As a sailor she did a tremendous amount of work and when she finally was released from service, she was financially compensated as a man would have been.

“The Likeliest Way to Obtain a Good Husband,” Providence Gazette; and Country Journal, 6 January 1770.

This newspaper article enhanced the traditional roles of women, by emphasizing that women always obey what their husbands say. It encouraged women to work to make the home as safe and comfortable a place as it can be, so that men can turn to the home as a sanctuary. This article was helpful because it showed how not all the media was supportive of the shifting roles of women during the Jeffersonian period.

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