
Women in Jeffersonian America

What Rights Did They Have?

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to put their own feet forward and get involved with decision making. Although women eventually returned "to the old family roles they had known in more peaceful times" after the Revolution ended and civilization returned to its normal pace, postwar society brought about new possibilities for women and "reinterpreted women's traditional roles in ways that eventually led to change" (Berkin, xvii). Thus, with their involvement in the American Revolution and their continued strength after the war, women across America initiated a new way of thinking about human equality, and consequently established the keystones for women's rights and the battles over those rights that they would face for the next 200 years.

Before their involvement in the American Revolution, women adapted their traditional role as wife and mother in colonial America, taking care of children and finding freedom in their only domain: the household. This lifestyle was traditional to the English migrants of the 1620's, who traveled to the Americas from Europe with ideas of "traditional social and political organization... [and] ideas stressing inequality [and] collectivity" (Norton, 4). Life was typically easier as a married woman in the colonies, and so women in colonial America held up the traditions of female roles as caregivers and housewives. Although some

It was commonplace before the American Revolution for women to attend solely to household affairs, remain quiet and live a proper but uneducated life (Berkin, 4). If a woman were to commit such a blasphemy as voicing an opinion, men would respond to this new sensation as "madness," regarding her temporary loss of wits as a moment of insanity. As absurd as this situation sounds, it was, quite simply, the way women were supposed to live. The theory of a woman holding any beliefs that were substantial and valid in comparison to a man's was generally out of the question; women were not raised to make decisions as men were. However, as society in America began to change with ideas promoted by the Enlightenment, women started to rethink these traditions. Something sparked inside women and kindled a new flame of independence, particularly around the time of the American Revolution, in which women's roles were vital. In moments leading up to and during the Revolution, women took risks and stood outside their comfort levels to take a stab at a new form of living. The fear of speaking out dissipated as women learned

women were single, and unmarried women in the new world could earn what wages they could, buy and sell property, and will any of their own personal assets to heirs (Berkin, 5), being single was usually frowned upon by the state. As a result, more women chose to marry. However, the "Founding Fathers of the 1780's were children of the Enlightenment, the political and intellectual movement that swept Europe and America after the late seventeenth century" (Norton, 4). In essence, they were redefining the meaning of equality and rethinking freedom as they knew it. The Enlightenment period, originally established in Europe and inspired by the writings of Locke and Newton, was a time in which the rising middle class began to question information that came from nobility and, particularly in the colonies, developed a more independent, skeptical attitude in response to the power of European rule. Therefore, within this gap between the "signers of the Mayflower Compact and those of the Constitution," women found themselves in two very distinct and different relationships with the state concerning their own rights (Norton, 4).

This new relationship allowed women to take up different roles during the Revolution, and created a sense of instability in society that provided for opportunities to reconfigure traditional values. With Enlightenment ideas fresh in mind, the Founding Fathers created the Constitution, to which women could point and ask: who exactly do we mean when we say "men"? A variety of ideals on what it meant for humans to have equal rights gave many different opportunities to women during the war, such as new roles as proprietors and figureheads within their own households as men went off to war, and brought into light the question of female equality in comparison to her male counterparts. As the country came together to fight British oppression, women redefined their roles in taking up new positions around the house and in the town; this confusion and uncertainty later became the centerpiece for the important ideas that were developed during and after the war.

One of the most important keystones that was established during the Revolution and played a crucial role in the development of women's rights was the transfer in women's roles from housewife to subsequent "surrogate father" (Berkin, 11) in times of the war. This foundation was by far the most powerful building block for women's rights because it established a role of power for women within their own homes and gave them the courage to slowly but surely work their way outwards to other aspects of traditional society. As the men went off to war to fight for their country's rights, women at home were forced to take up responsibilities previously overseen by their husbands. Women struggled to manage on their own. With "small children to tend, prices quickly spiraling upward, shortages of everyday necessities ...and above all the loss of family members who normally tilled the fields, ran the shops, or worked the docks" (Berkin, 31), women had to make sure the upkeep of the land was well taken care of not only in support of their family but to also give soldiers something to come home to when they returned from war. As a result, women became more accustomed to making household decisions and headed the house in place of the man. This

new concept gave women the power to make decisions for themselves and allowed them, for the first time, to feel a sense of empowerment outside the kitchen.

After women started to articulate their own ideas at home, a second key factor emerged, which significantly changed the future roles of women in a general movement from "custodian" to "proprietor" (Berkin, 11); many women took over family businesses as well as homes when men became soldiers, and therefore financially managed the success of the business while the men were away. The immense pressure to continuously supply troops with necessities built upon itself during the Revolution, and so women learned to facilitate and take over certain jobs themselves. This gave women the first opportunity to run a business as its sole manager, and gave them the power to make decisions based on what they thought was most necessary (Norton, 44). Instead of raising the money to have war products made and sold, for example, women "had taken on the chore themselves" (Berkin, 48). By the early 1780's, Sarah Bache, daughter of Benjamin Franklin, even reported that she was "busily employ'd in cutting out and making shirts, and giving them out to make to the good women of my acquaintance, for our Brave Soldiers" (Berkin, 48). Women learned how to use their strengths and abilities to help keep their homes and businesses flowing smoothly while the war continued.

However, very few women enjoyed this new ability and took on the role as "proprietor" rather reluctantly, feeling that it was only their "patriotic duty" (Norton, 6) to support their husbands. After the war ended, married women gladly handed back the position to their husbands and those who had been widowed were generally burdened with keeping up the business in hopes of one day passing it off to their sons (if they had any). However, the idea of women working alongside men, from an economic standpoint, meant more profit and a stronger economy; thus, the notion of women in the workforce was kept on reserve for the future as a possible means for the continued growth and strength of the economy, setting up another foundation for women's rights and equality.

After the Revolution, more elements that were crucial to the basis of women's rights began to appear. As previously discussed, most women were eager to return to their previous, more traditional life after the brutalities they had witnessed alone during the war. However, there was a small group of elite men and women who considered it essential to "pause and consider the lessons the Revolution offered, if any, for women, and to decide what changes in women's roles might seem necessary in the new Republican society" (Berkin, 149). Although this period did not last long, these "intellectuals engaged in a lively debate over what in the next century came to be called as 'the woman question.' In their arguments, these women and men wove together prewar trends and postwar possibilities" (Berkin, 149) for women and thus articulated new and important ideas about human equality in the new world and its shaping. According to Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, the ideas from the Constitution after the war "left civil society fully open as a public sphere in which first white and then black women were able to flourish as never before. Instead of

restricting them to the household, the Republic's establishment facilitated the entry of women into this rapidly expanding social space" (Kelley, 7). Although this keystone seemed somewhat short-lived and only seems to last for only a period of time in American history, the conversations held in the development of "the woman question" were crucial in defining women's roles in society and were used as a specific reference in later years when women once again came forth to proclaim their rights.

These keystones, established during and after the Revolution, showed many that the women of this era took important steps and, although it is likely that they never realized the true power of their efforts, were role models to younger generations of women who turned to them for guidance when facing notions of independence and equal rights. After the war was over, the most important aspects of equality had been laid down: women did an equally good job at running their own businesses and households as men did and essentially kept the backbone of the country running while men fought for America's independence. In postwar months, America reverted to a more traditional way of life in most families, and women went back to their homes and tended to their typical roles; however, the ground had been broken and the ideas for true equality had been released. The concepts women developed in this time were most essential to future battles over women's rights, as history saw these traditions repeated again, particularly in World War II, as women once again picked up roles that were typically held by men. These keystones also developed other important ideas concerning human equality because they brought out "the intellectual recognition of women as rational beings" and combined it with "the economic reality of a decline in household production to produce a shift in prosperous women's familial role" (Berkin, 156) for future generations. In short, these Revolutionary women worked through their actions and set up the basis for the rights that women would turn back to for many years ahead.

Bibliography

Berkin, Carol. Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the struggle for America's Independence. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.

Carol Berkin offered the most insight for this essay in terms of background and specific examples of women during the Revolutionary War. Interestingly, she shows the aid of women as a vital component to the success of the Revolution and explains how this era was most important in developing women's roles.

Grando, Victoria T. "A Hard Day's Work: Institutional Nursing in the Post-World War II Era." *Nursing History Review* 8.1062-8061 (2000). History Reference Center. EBSCO. Belk Library, Elon University, NC. 16 Mar. 2008 <<http://search.ebscohost.com/>>.

Grando discusses the importance of women's roles during World War II in this article; the text was mostly used in reference to WWII and the working conditions for women in the nursing business, one of the most dangerous jobs of the time for women, and post WWII occurrences that caused women to continue to work.

Lyons, Clare. Sex Among the Rabble. North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

This book was used as a reference to gender roles within 1760 to 1780, before times of the Revolution (particularly in Philadelphia), and how women held important positions as mothers and wives in society but were rather restricted in their activity. Lyons shows the roles of women before ideas of the Constitution were developed, and, in comparison to men, how their roles affected their behavior during the Colonial era.

Norton, Mary Beth. Founding Fathers and Mothers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society. New York: Random House, Inc., 1996.

Norton's eloquent and highly interesting style serves as an interesting reference to the Founding Fathers and Mothers in pre-Jeffersonian America and how men and women together shaped the basis for American society before the Revolution in the mid 1600's. The text offers a study of the responsibilities and roles that women and men both played in the New World; it also distinctly separates male and female roles in society to show how noticeably different each gender was defined.

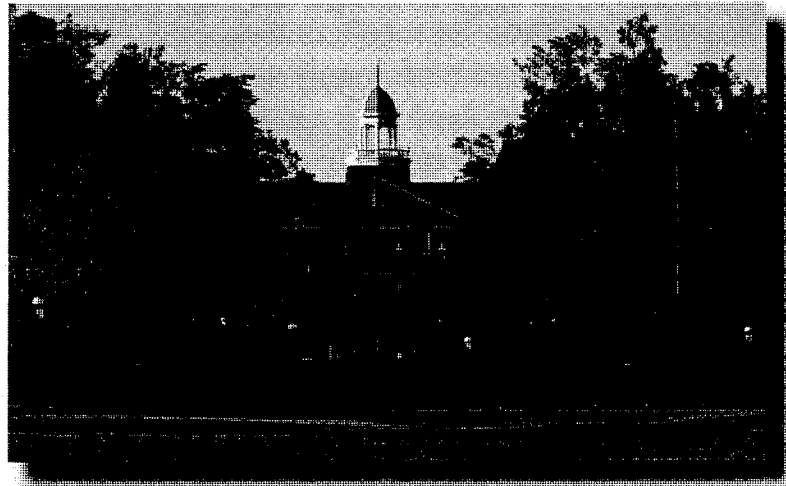
Kelley, Mary. Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic. The University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

As its title reads, this text delves into the topic of women's roles as America's Republic was being formed and the Constitution was scripted. Learning to Stand and Speak plucks women out from this time period and analyzes their importance with regards to their own rights and explains how, as women became more educated, their interest in society flourished.

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