5-3-2018

Museum of Revolutionary Women (MRW) Exhibition Tour and Companion Catalog

Diana K. Batchelor
The College at Brockport, dbatc1@u.brockport.edu

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Diana Batchelor, Chief Curator, would like to thank the following people and groups for making this MA companion catalog possible:

My family, especially Katherine, Glenn, Jason, and Grant Batchelor, and my wonderful extended family;

My grandparents, Walter X. Kane and Dorthy A. (Miller) Kane, who gave me the gift of an education;

The History and Political Science Department at Nazareth College of Rochester, especially my mentors Dr. Thomas Lappas and Dr. Timothy Thibodeau;

The History Department at the State University of New York at Brockport, especially Dr. James Spiller and Dr. John Daly; Dr. Mary Ellen Zuckerman of the Business Department; and Elisabeth Gonzalez, Assistant Director of the Student Learning Center;

Perinton, NY Town Historian, William Poray;

The wonderful group of museum professionals at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum (PAAM) in Provincetown, MA, especially Registrar Seth Abrahamson;

and Rochester City Historian Christine Ridarsky.

... Thank you for your endless love and support.

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Background Image by artist George Alfred Williams, ca. 1917. Courtesy of Eon Images: History Has a Face

Museum of Revolutionary Women
MISSION STATEMENT:

The Museum of Revolutionary Woman (MRW)’s mission is to showcase the agency of Anglo-Saxon, African American, and Native American women during the American Revolution through the display and maintenance of original papers, poems, letters, and other written artifacts, as well as material objects of significance including personal belongings, artifacts, and paintings.

OVERVIEW OF COLLECTIONS POLICY:

The MRW’s collection policy is highly reflective of it’s mission to conserve, display, and educate about a body of primary and secondary source material that is essential to the study of American history.

AUDIENCE:

The MRW aims to educate diverse audiences of all ages and perspectives. Human history is collectively owned, and the MRW takes great pride in being able to represent and tell the stories of historically marginalized peoples.

A NOTE ABOUT DIGITAL IMMERSION:

Just as there are several click-able links in the MRW’s Virtual Tour component, select images are linked throughout this companion catalog to enhance the reader’s experience and encourage further investigation. Additional badges and icons are also available with guides to supplemental readings.
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Every nation and civilization has a central founding narrative that is ingrained in its history. In Ancient Rome, the story of Romulus and Remus was central to Roman identity and culture. The same can be said for the United States, where the American War of Independence (1775-1781) featured thirteen culturally different North American colonies who miraculously banded together to seek independence from the then largest colonial superpower in Imperial History.

The American Colonies cast a bold — and potentially dangerous — stone into the waters of Imperial History when, in April of 1775, the first shots of Independence were fired the Old North Bridge in Concord, Massachusetts. Famous essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson would later observe this event with poetic grace, and rightly title the events on April 19, 1775 as the “Shot[s] Heard Around the World.”

Colonists sought independence from Great Britain not just for the sake of individual liberty. As many modern historians have suggested, the reasons for such a miraculous spark of rebellion were multi-faceted and complex. These revolutionary events were triggered by changes in economics, a varying social atmosphere, and political landscapes heavily influenced by Enlightenment thought, and the events that transpired from 1775-1781 were filled with unique players on an ever-changing stage.

Popular memory of the American Revolution is often framed with images of powdered wigs, buckled shoes, and musket fire. Many may recall famous figures like George Washington, the General of the American Continental Army and the nation’s first president; Benjamin Franklin, the witty philosopher, inventor, and diplomat; and — thanks to a blockbuster Broadway show — Alexander Hamilton. Others may recall historically significant documents like the Declaration of Independence and Thomas Paine’s iconic pamphlet Common Sense. However, the cherished popular founding narrative of America overlooks the contributions of women; this exhibition intends to highlight these perspectives.
Furthermore, the mission of this virtual exhibition at the Museum of Revolutionary Women (MRW) is to bring the historical investigations of contemporary historians into the realm of public history, or what the National Council on Public History defines as “the many and diverse ways in which history is put to work in the world.” While there is a significant amount of new academic research, there has been little done in the realm of public history to bridge these new findings. New research and cross-discipline methodologies — especially from anthropology and gender studies — are shedding light on the historical accounts of marginalized groups and those often left out of the historical narrative. Moreover, eighteenth century women — including Anglo-Saxon, African American, and Native American — actively participated in and commented on the changing world around them in the context of the American Revolution by spreading revolutionary ideology; preserving their values as cultural leaders; engaging in economic boycotts, political discourse, and espionage; and supporting the Continental Army.

Above all, this exhibition is an attempt to showcase the participation and choices — or what historians and sociologists call agency — of women in eighteenth century Colonial America. Women were not static background players on the grand stage of history; rather, they were major — if not central — figures whom uniquely contributed to our founding. The effort here is not to realign the historical gaze of early American history away from the founders, major battles, or any other prominently analyzed feature of the Revolution. The MRW seeks to broaden viewer’s perspectives and add to existing knowledge with the hopes of creating a more full and enriched picture of America’s founding.
The discipline of history expanded in the twentieth century to include perspectives from different fields such as public history and museum studies. Furthermore, as other scholars continue to share their methodologies and techniques (especially anthropologists, sociologists, and archaeologists) the discipline of history will continue to grow. As historians Donald R. Kelley and Bonnie G. Smith suggest, “historians will remain as varied a group as ever, with a range of practices and sources variously shaping the field in the future as they have in the past.”1 Though the past remains constant, the perspectives and tools used to uncover and investigate new meaning are ever-changing.

Likewise, new techniques and methodologies of investigating the past produce new perspectives. Women’s History is a relatively new scholarly field that seeks to uncover the once-silent and under-studied voices of women throughout history.

The benefits of Women’s History — and more broadly of gender studies — are of significance: the perspective of gender lends scholars the ability to uncover new viewpoints and shed light on a marginalized group in history. Women’s History also enables historians to better fit together the pieces of the tricky puzzle of history. By studying women’s roles during the American Revolution through the perspective of gender, the Museum of Revolutionary Women aims to shed light on the choices and roles Anglo-Saxon, African American, and Native American women made during a time of immense change.

However, the challenges of Women’s History stem from one of the reasons for the group’s past exclusion from the historian’s gaze. Unlike great men in history, there is sometimes little documentary evidence revealing the character and thoughts of women. However, through the use of a contextual analysis from a variety of perspectives, scholars are able to piece together a more complete puzzle. These challenges remain ever-present in the pursuit of historical truth. Ultimately, the MRW wants its audience to have a richer and broader understanding of the Revolutionary period by bringing in new bits of evidence that profile Anglo-Saxon, African American, and Native American women before, during, and after the American Revolution.

“Well-behaved women rarely make history.”

- Laurel Thatcher Ulrich
Early American Historian and professor
at Harvard University
Part 1:

The Women of Colonial America

1600-1765

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress, USA
Gendered Spheres: 
A GLIMPSE INTO THE LIVES OF 
18TH CENTURY WOMEN

Women’s History is a relatively new field in what is a century and a half old historical profession. Influential philosopher Michel Foucault introduced the conception of the “historian’s gaze” when studying history, and has been utilized by scholars of Women’s History. Furthermore, Foucault’s philosophical construction of the lens — or in other words, perspective — has enabled historians, particularly historians of gender, to reflect on history and investigate unique social trends.¹ In the context of Women’s History, Foucault’s theory of the historian’s gaze allows historians to observe the roles and expectations of women in the eighteenth century, which were far different than those of today.

Moreover, the lens of gender overlaps with other human categories, especially race and culture. Through these intersecting historical lenses, more information can be extracted to paint a picture of particular gender expectations of different races and cultures. The intersecting groups studied at the MRW — Anglo-Saxon White Women, African American Women, and Native American Women — showcase unique distinctions and similarities between the three groups. Despite their unique circumstances and choices, these groups of women actively participated in and commented on the changing world around them in the context of the American Revolution.

White women of European descent — either from the Old World (Europe) or residing in the New World (North America) — lived in a society of structurally rigid gender expectations and spheres. The masculine and feminine domains rarely overlapped. This is particularly evident in Eliza Smith’s 1750 Williamsburg edition of *The Complete House Wife, or, Accomplished Gentlewoman’s Companion*. In this collective work, Smith employs a guide on how to prepare and cook certain foods. Smith’s *Gentlewoman’s Companion* is considered by many to be the first published cookbook in the colonies. This pinnacle work is a fantastic tool to not only catch a glimpse of the particular roles in which women were expected to accomplish, but also can be viewed as an example of the choices women had when preparing and cooking various meals.

Despite strict expectations, women — especially Anglo-Saxon women — partly asserted their agency through the materials and objects they used in their daily lives. For historians, the study of *material culture* has enabled deeper investigations of not only the types of materials and objects used by particular peoples, but also enables speculations into their cultural value.¹ According to historian Karin Calvert, clothing throughout the 17th and 18th centuries had become increasingly gender-specific. Materials like silks and lace, in addition to items of personal adornment like jewelry, became exclusively worn by women.² Although material culture items like clothing became more gender-specific, its analysis enables historians to get a feel for the cultural values and aesthetic qualities of the past. For 18th century Anglo-Saxon women in particular, fashion choices enabled a sense of agency in an increasingly gender-specific world.³

Items A—D are samples of the types of clothing colonial women wore, especially Anglo-Saxon women. Although modern perspectives suggest that these items of clothing limited women and are perceived as uncomfortable, they were products of the time. Through their choices and selections of clothing, women were able to create a unique fashion standard during 18th century Colonial America.

Caps and hats provided colonial women the opportunity to dress their heads. Caps such as Item A were used indoors to prevent dust and dirt from getting into working ladies’ hair. Their purpose was more utilitarian when compared to the traditional hat such as Item B. Although these hats served the purpose of providing shade, they were some of the earliest examples of fashion. In this sense, fashion serves as an example of early colonial women’s agency when it came to presentation of the self in colonial society.

Women’s shirts were a common undergarment, either made of plain white linen or trimmed with decorative lace. Gowns and dresses were a staple of women’s fashion during the 18th century across all classes. The more elaborate gowns were reserved for wealthy women while more simple but comfortable dresses were worn by working and middle class women. Nevertheless, the design of each essential piece of a clothing is a testament to the choices available to Anglo-Saxon women. As an critical part of material culture studies, fashion enables historians to get a sense of the popular styles and choices in past centuries. In the context of early Colonial America, women’s fashion and style possessed meaning; whatever their choices, Anglo-Saxon women in early Colonial America exerted their agency through personal adornment.
Puritan New England placed women in a strict engendered spheres. Puritan women were expected to fulfill the role of wife and mother, performing domestic duties such as tidying and cooking, and serve the community of their fellow Puritans. Women were rarely educated through formal schooling. Instead, they learned the skills necessary to be a good wife and mother. In Puritan New England, these womanly roles held even greater importance for those apart of what they believed as “God’s chosen society.”

Born in 1612 and a part of the earliest expeditions to the New World in 1630, Anne Dudley Bradstreet is practically unknown to the conventional histories of Colonial America. While there is no formal portrait of her that was painted of her during her life time nor a defined resting place after her death in 1672, historians are able to put together a picture of Anne Bradstreet and the times she lived in through the analysis of her provocative poetry. Her collection of poems — published in London in 1650 titled *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* — paints a poetic picture of her time as a Puritan woman in New England. Bradstreet received no formal education, but her poetry’s ability to become popular in London and remain notable among contemporary poets is a testament to her literary prowess. Above all, her poetry evokes deep emotion and literary power, and ultimately reflects the religious and emotional struggles of being a woman in Puritan New England. This is most evident in the following transcript of her poem titled “The Author to Her Book” where she argues with herself and her book (see the following page).
“The Author to Her Book” by Anne Bradstreet, 1650

Thou ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain,
Who after birth didst by my side remain,
Till snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true,
Who thee abroad, exposed to public view,
Made thee in rags, halting to th’ press to trudge,
Where errors were not lessened (all may judge).
At thy return my blushing was not small,
My rambling brat (in print) should mother call,
I cast thee by as one unfit for light,
The visage was so irksome in my sight;
Yet being mine own, at length affection would
Thy blemishes amend, if so I could.
I washed thy face, but more defects I saw,
And rubbing off a spot still made a flaw.
I stretched thy joints to make thee even feet,
Yet still thou run’st more hobbling than is meet;
In better dress to trim thee was my mind,
But nought save homespun cloth i’ th’ house I find.
In this array ’mongst vulgars may’st thou roam,
In critic’s hands beware thou dost not come,
And take thy way where yet thou art not known;
If for thy father asked, say thou hadst none;
And for thy mother, she alas is poor,
Which caused her thus to send thee out of door.
The vast majority of African American women in the early 18th century were enslaved and had little opportunity to live freely in the New World. The institution of human enslavement carried over from the Old World, and rooted itself as an economically prosperous endeavor at the cost and disruption of millions of African American lives.

The lack of conventional historical sources and material culture from early African American slaves poses a major challenge for contemporary scholars to accurately reconstruct a fragmented past. The personal thoughts and accounts are often unavailable as only a small number of enslaved African Americans could read and write. However, oral accounts of their histories and observations were recorded by observers of the time, especially by white writers. If we take into account the strong potential of racial bias and uncover the deeper meaning of these recordings, we are given the opportunity to reach the collective voices of a group once left to the margins of history. Methodologies and techniques from other disciplines such as archeology, anthropology, and sociology provide additional assistance when studying early African American history.¹

Furthermore, African American women of Colonial American lived at the intersection of a society built on racial categories and hierarchies in addition to specific gender roles and expectations. Conventional knowledge during their time suggested that African American women were uneducated and uncivilized peoples, bound to the land and masters they were enslaved to serve. This perspective not only places African American women in a background role on the grand stage of history, but downplays their ultimate triumph to achieve agency in their lives when the greater forces around them prevented them from doing so.

Under slavery, enslaved families remained under the authority of their white masters. In many cases, however, multiple enslaved families on the same plantation led to the creation of a unique African American community. This valuable social atmosphere fostered the agency of African American women, where they were able to express themselves through oral cultural traditions and folklore, material culture, and style. Studying these social communities enables scholars to get an idea of slave life and the triumph of African traditions in the New World, and observe the agency of African American women in 18th century Colonial America.²

Hairstyling, especially of African American women, held deep aesthetic meaning and provides the opportunity for scholars to view examples of early African American women’s agency. The earliest sketch of the hairstyles of a particular group of African American peoples comes from Dutch explorer Pieter de Marees’ 1602 expedition of the African kingdom of Benin. Furthermore, a recent study by historians Shane White and Graham White points to a developing investigation of the hairstyles of enslaved African Americans, especially women. Accordingly, African American women used hairstyles (with the addition of bobbles and other intricate pieces of adornment) to convey aesthetic standards and messages to the dominant culture in which they resided in. For example, some women preferred to style their hair long and bushy to emphasize its racially unique and distinctive texture. This type of styling may have been an attempt to celebrate their natural biology in a racist society that continued to define “blackness” as lesser to “whiteness.” The concept of style in material culture is, according to historian Jules Prown, culturally expressive. Thus, the hairstyles of enslaved African American women serves as evidence of the agency achieved in a time of hardship, especially in early Colonial North America.

“The Singer of History”

Lucy Terry Prince

In the early twentieth century, W.E.B. DuBois was one of the first influential black writers to advocate for the inclusion of the black experience in American history in order to raise the historical consciousness of a wide spectrum of viewers.1 Unfortunately, early African American histories — mostly written by white men — portrayed enslaved African Americans as uncivilized and uneducated, existing only in the position of slavery. Contemporary scholarship is now uncovering the truth that many African American women in the early 18th century possessed greater agency over their lives. One such example is the life and legacy of Lucy Terry Prince.

Born in West Africa in 1724 and captured as an infant, Lucy Terry Prince was one of the first recorded African American poets in Colonial America. When her original master Samuel Terry died in 1732, she was sent to live with Ebenezer Wells of Deerfield, Massachusetts. Although still perceived as a piece of property as an enslaved woman, her time in the Wells’ household contributed to her growth as a writer, orator, and poet. Her most notable poem — “Bars Fight” — was written in 1746, which narrates the story of a confrontation between white settlers and Native Americans in Deerfield, MA.

However, the original record of Prince’s original poem is not in existence. It was shared orally for more than a century until being formally published in 1855 by Josiah G. Holland in his collective history, History of Western Massachusetts.² Nevertheless, the significance of Lucy Terry Prince’s “Bars Fight” is best described by historian David R. Proper: “[Prince’s poem] perofrms one of the earliest essential services of the poet — that of a singer of history . . . [her poem] is described as the most accurate historical account of the engagement known.”³ Thus, Prince herself became best known as one of the first African American “Singers of History” in Early Colonial America.

Other than her prowess as a poet, Prince’s oratory skills are of significance. After marrying a freed Abijah Prince in 1756 and effectively earning her freedom, Lucy Terry Prince is noted to have argued before the U.S. Supreme Court in the mid-1790s. Although there is little to no official record or transcript of her court case, sources of the time indicate her exceptional skills as a speaker. She died in 1821 at the great age of 91.

"Bars Fight" by Lucy Terry Prince, 1746

August ‘twas the twenty-fifth,
Seventeen hundred forty-six;
The Indians did in ambush lay,
Some very valiant men to slay.
The names of whom I’ll not leave out.
Samuel Allen like a hero fout,
And though he was so brave and bold,
His face no more shalt we behold.
Eteazer Hawks was killed outright,
Before he had time to fight,-
Before he did the Indians see,
Was shot and killed immediately.
Oliver Amsden he was slain,
Which caused his friends much grief and pain.
Simeon Amsden they found dead,
Not many rods distant from his head.
Adonijah Gillett we do hear
Did lose his life which was so dear.
John Sadler fled across the water,
And thus escaped the dreadful slaughter.
Eunice Allen see the Indians coming,
And hopes to save herself by running,
And had not her petticoats stopped her,
The awful creatures had not caught her,
Nor tommy hawked her on the head,
And left her on the ground for dead.
Young Samuel Allen, Oh lack-a-day!
Was taken and carried to Canada.
Native American Women

In the past decades, Native American history and scholarship has undergone a noteworthy transformation. Through the use of interdisciplinary methodologies and techniques, contemporary historians are able to reconstruct Native American history and justly honor the cultures and values of Indigenous Peoples. Combined with the traditions of contemporary Native American resources, scholars are able to expand perspectives to pay tribute to the original peoples of North America, whom inhabited specific parts of the continent centuries before European interest.

Although from different nations and regions, Native American women actively participated in their communities. In many nations, women held political, economic, and spiritual power. Differing from the Patriarchal European model, clans and nations honored a Matriarchal system. Furthermore, Indigenous women participated in the selection of tribal chiefs and were widely respected as village elders. As contact with Europeans increased over the 16th and 17th centuries, Indigenous women also found a way to deal with land disputes and foster diplomatic relations with their white neighbors.

European sources often commented on the Natives' techniques of working their land, often pointing out the Natives' seemingly “unwillingness” to work the land to its full potential. On the contrary, Indigenous peoples easily adapted to the changing seasons and ecosystems and rather than exploit their land entirely (as per the European model). Seasons of abundance yielded plenty of food for the communities of Natives who began to perfect the practice of agriculture. According to environmental historian William Cronon, these communities — with an equal distribution of work between men and women — contributed to over eighty percent of their respective populations.1 Through this system in particular, Native American women shared in the spoils of success.

The Iroquois Confederacy

Perhaps one of the oldest and most established bodies of Indigenous civilization, the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca nations of the North East (specifically what is now modern-day New York State) established themselves as a part of a single Iroquois Confederacy — or Haudenosaunee (“people of the long house”) — around the fourteenth century A.D. Each of the five nations had their respective sachem (chief) that ultimately represented their respective nation at confederacy council meetings.¹

Women within the five nations of the Iroquois Confederacy exercised a great deal of power and agency within their local political, social, and economic realms. On a fundamental level, Iroquoian women were at the center of ancient Iroquoian myths and legends.² Held in high regard, they participated in the selection of their respective sachems, held the same status and respect as males within society, and equally contributed to their economy by mastering agricultural techniques and essential crafts. Like other Native American nations, Iroquoian society was Matrilineal, and Iroquois women were essentially the keepers of Haudenosaunee culture. Moreover, the Haudenosaunee lived in unique dwellings called Long Houses. These magnificent structures could hold an entire clan, and were central to maintaining Iroquoian life, values, and culture. As such, Iroquoian women were the figureheads of these Long Houses, and possessed ownership over their own material culture. The eldest woman of each nation’s respective Long Houses were highly regarded, and placed in the role of power and influence as the Clan Mother.³

Methodologies and techniques from other disciplines have yielded a plethora of information for historians. Material objects uncovered through archaeological excavations have produced valuable pieces of Native American material culture. Moreover, Iroquoian women actively participated in particular crafts and trades, especially ceramics. This intact Iroquoian clay pot — a magnificent find by contemporary archaeologists — is an example of the ceramics created by Iroquoian women. The intricate detail and design towards the lip of the pot showcases the artists’ mastery of her craft.

³ Katsihiwi Ashley Thomas, “Gender Roles Among the Iroquois.” Mohawk Transcription, Vanier College.
The legend of Pocahontas — the beloved princess of one of the largest and most powerful Indigenous Nations in early Colonial America — has long held center stage in popular memory when discussing early Native American women. Disney’s portrayal of the Algonquin princess largely bounces between historical mythology and reality. To give the company fair credit, Pocahontas was a significant figure in the Powhatan Confederacy, and played an even greater role in diplomatic relations between her people and encroaching Europeans settled in Jamestown, Virginia. However, Disney’s portrayal of her story has ingrained too much myth into popular memory, and has distorted the historical reality that ultimately made her a legend in early North American history.

Furthermore, the Powhatan Confederacy held great prominence in the area they labeled as Tsenacomoco. Europeans would later refer to this as the colony of Virginia. Wahunsenaca — also referred to as Chief Powhatan — was the mamanatowick (or paramount chief) of the Powhatan Confederacy, and father of Pocahontas. Believed to have been born in 1596, Pocahontas was around eleven years of age when English explorers arrived in the Chesapeake Bay in 1607.
One can imagine the shock and wonder during exact moment when the European expedition made contact with the Powhatan peoples in the Chesapeake Bay. European sources recall Pocahontas as being a curious yet excited young woman, characteristics that would later propel her to prominence in the Powhatan Confederacy. In the years to come following the initial Virginia Expedition, Pocahontas would eventually become the peacemaker and diplomat between her people and future European explorers.

Pocahontas’ first encounter with the historical figure of Captain John Smith was in 1607 at the age of 11. Contrary to popular memory, their encounter was not romantic nor magical; rather, it was one of life or death. Smith would later recount this encounter a decade later in his published journal: “[the Powhatan’s] laid his head on two stones as if to ‘beate out his brains,’ when Pocahontas ‘got his head in her armes, and laid her owne upon his to save him from death.’”1 By this time, relations between the Powhatans and Europeans had soured. Pocahontas’ actions were respected by both sides, and Smith departed the colony two years later. However, the Powhatan Princess was captured by the English in 1613 and used as a bargaining chip to negotiate the release of seven captured settlers by the Powhatans from a previous skirmish. From then on, Pocahontas lived among the European settlers at the Jamestown settlement as a welcomed hostage, converted to Christianity, and eventually married tobacco planter John Rolfe. She traveled to England in 1616 with Rolfe but fell ill the next year and tragically died. In the immediate years following her death, diplomatic relations between the Powhatans and the European settlers soured further, resulting in bloodshed and warefare.

The history of Pocahontas’ story is undoubtedly tragic. She was captured and forced to assimilated to European society and later died at a very young age. However, her story as a steadfast and courageous young Native woman is more than enough to propel her as a premiere legend of early Colonial American history. She was an active participant in her world during a time of significant historical transformation and is a clear example of the agency of indigenous women. Although the Disney film is not entirely historically accurate, it captures the significance of Pocahontas as a major player on the grand stage of American History.

Part 2:

Revolutionary Women

1765-1781

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress, USA

MUSEUM OF REVOLUTIONARY WOMEN
The magnitude and historical significance of the American War of Independence has long inspired historians to investigate its philosophical meaning on social, economic, and political levels. Historian Bernard Bailyn analyzes the political implications of the American Revolution through the analysis of pamphlets, letters, and other written documents in his work *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. Bailyn argues that the ideological foundations of the American War of Independence were extremely radical for the time.\(^1\) However, while Bailyn’s political analysis is exceptional, it only completes one part of a rather tricky ideological puzzle of the American Revolution. Perhaps Gordon S. Wood’s investigation in his monumental work *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* offers the missing puzzle pieces that are complementary to Bailyn’s overall analysis. Wood takes a different approach to the American War of Independence by analyzing the transforming social world of the American Colonies: “[The American Revolution] was one of the greatest revolutions the world has known, a momentous upheaval that not only fundamentally altered the character of American society but decisively affected the course of subsequent history.”\(^2\)

If both investigations are synthesized, scholars are left with a turbulent time in American history that extends beyond just warfare and a colonial uprising. Although the concepts of liberty and independence varied between Anglo-Saxon, African American, and Native American women, each group asserted their collective agency during the ideal opportunity posed to them during the American Revolution. Furthermore, as the following pages illustrate, these groups of revolutionary women:

- Wrote poems, satire, and propaganda;
- Exercised their economic power by organizing boycotts;
- Engaged in risky espionage;
- Passed as men to fight in various battles;
- Actively influenced men in power;
- Healed the sick and aided the wounded as nurses;
- Engaged in diplomacy as cultural leaders;
- Helped prisoners of war escape;
- And much, much more.

The women of Colonial America fully comprehended the fact that they stood in the threshold that linked their old world to a potentially greater one. Above all, the MRW seeks to tell these stories and honor their attempts to assert their agency in Revolutionary America.

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The French and Indian War, 1754–1763
- French & Native Americans vs. English & American colonists with territorial skirmishes.
- Treaty of Paris (1763) actively removes French land claims from the North American colonies.
- While this may have been an English victory, it heavily increased the British war debt. In the upcoming years, Parliament would need to increase revenue through heavy taxation.

The Stamp Act, 1765
- Becomes a law on March 22, 1765.
- Paper goods had to be stamped on particular, British supplied paper, or face a fine.
- Effected almost everyone, which lead to heavy resentment and anger throughout the colonies.
- Shift from external taxation to internal taxation.

Increased Unrest, 1765
- Boston patriots terrorize tax collectors, particularly the case of Andrew Oliver.
- Effigie burnings become commonplace.

Committees of Correspondence, 1772
- Political leaders from the colonies (especially Samuel Adams) create a secret network titled the Committees of Correspondence.
- Acted as a news network between the colonies to pass along information about British injustices.

The Tea Act, 1773
- British import British-made cheap tea in an attempt to appease the furious colonists.
- Colonists view this act as a ploy to pay the taxes enforced by the Townshend Duties.
- Governor Hutchinson of Boston, who was appointed by the British, puts his foot down and closes the ports in Boston until the colonists bought the tea, effectively restricting trade.
- With the help of the Committees of Correspondence, this hostage-like action quickly spread around the colonies.

Coercive/Intolerable Acts, 1774
- In response to the Boston Tea Party, King George III and the British Parliament send troops into Boston to coerce the colonists into behaving.
- Boston Ports are officially closed and British soldiers are forced to be quartered in Colonists’ houses.

The Sugar Act, 1764
- Placed a tariff on molasses, a valuable ingredient, in order to raise revenue and repay war debts.
- Lowered tariff on foreign molasses, which lead to easy smuggling and bribery of customs, because of unregulated waters by the British.
- The 15th Act of the Sugar Act alluded to the upcoming Stamp Act.

The Townshend Duties, 1767
- Placed a heavy tax on glass, paper, lead, paints, and tea in the American colonies.
- Colonists collectively agree not to import and boycott those specific goods in addition to British-made goods.
- British troops sent to colonies in 1767, many arriving in Boston to settle colonial unrest.

The Boston Massacre, 1770
- Occurs on March 5, 1770 and is viewed by historians as the pivotal event that broke good relations between American colonists and the British.
- Boston colonists taunt a British patrol on the night of March 5, 1770. Eventually, the taunting turns to throwing snowballs and other projectiles.
- Large commotion leads to a shot ringing out. To this day, no one is sure who fired the first shot.
- The British patrol, thinking they were given orders to shoot, fired on the crowd, killing 5 (including women and children), and wounding several.
- The patrol was tried in a court of law, where the proceedings lasted until December.
- The events of that night which became known as the Boston Massacre — quickly circulated around the colonies. Pieces of propaganda, especially Paul Revere’s famous engraving, circulate as well.

The Boston Tea Party, 1773
- Occurred on December 16, 1773.
- Boston patriots, led by Samuel Adams, disguise themselves as Native Americans and sneak on board to docked British ships filled with unused tea.
- Cases of British tea are thrown into the harbor, a clear symbol of resistance to British authority on the part of the New England colonists.

Lexington & Concord, 1775
- King George III sends troops to seize a rebel stockpile rumored to have been located in Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts. However, this information is intercepted by colonial intelligence.
- On April 18, 1775, Paul Revere — in conjunction with William Dawes — rides to Lexington and Concord, warning village leaders of the marching British.
- At dawn on April 18th, the New England militia and minute men assemble to face off against the British at the Old North Bridge in Lexington, MA.
- The New England militia use skirmish tactics, effectively forcing the British to retreat back to Boston.
Colonial Women: Organizers for Action

When the British Parliament voted to enforce numerous pieces of legislation that placed heavy taxes on Colonial goods, the Colonists were understandably enraged. For close to fifty years before the 1764 Sugar Act, the American Colonies enjoyed a period of economic growth and prosperity; sudden taxation without a say from representatives of the colonies certainly caught the colonists off guard. When the next decade after the Sugar Act brought increased taxation and harsher penalties towards resistance, many notable colonists — especially Samuel Adams — formed secret networks of communication to report British injustices. Overall, each piece of taxation the British placed on their North American colonies only increased resentment and stir the patriotic passions of the Colonists.

The world of colonial women had transformed greatly in years past. In the immediate years before the American Revolution, women were active in rallying resistance. When, for example, the early pieces of taxation (including the Sugar Act, Stamp Act, and Townshend Duties) were put into affect, women actively protested for non-consumption and the boycotts of the specific goods now taxable under British law. As historian T.H. Breen notes, the opportunity for women “to redefine private household decisions as public political acts seemed an exciting prospect for women of all classes and backgrounds. They sensed that they had gained a measure of real power in the public sphere.” Women thus refused to patronize British merchants, who in turn placed pressure in the British legislature for action when they complained about sharply declining sales. Moreover, boycotting goods was an especially powerful tactic used to repeal the Stamp Act a year after its inception in 1766. Overall, historian Carol Berkin puts it best: “What a woman bought when she went to a shop, what she ate, what she drank, and the clothing she chose to wear could all signal a political commitment as well as a personal choice.” Additionally, women sometimes used anonymity to submit verses into colonial newspapers, such as this one from the Boston News Letter, advocating for the boycott of British-made goods:

First, then, throw aside your topknots of pride,
Wear none but your own country linen;
Of economy boast, let your pride be the most
To show clothes of your own make and spinning!³

Women may not have been in as active roles as tavern rallies, but they rallied support and developed revolutionary ideals within their own private social circles and domestic spheres. British Cartoonists observed this strategy, and often depicted it in unflattering cartoons such as the one pictured here. From the cartoonist’s perspective concerning the role of women, they most likely perceived the participation of Colonial women in political discourse and economic boycotts as unwomanly and a threat to the sanctity of virtuous womanhood.

3 Berkin, Revolutionary Mothers, 16.
As revolutionary ideology circulated throughout the colonies, women actively commented on them through civil discourse and their own writings to inspire and provoke readers. **Phillis Wheatley** (1753—1784), similar to Lucy Terry Prince and Anne Bradstreet, used the power of the pen to express her thoughts of Revolutionary ideologies such as freedom and liberty from the perspective of an African American woman. As a slave and servant to a wealthy family in Massachusetts, Wheatley was in the epicenter of revolutionary ideology. Her master, John Wheatley of Boston, MA, encouraged Phillis’ education and she quickly expressed her talents through her writing. Her innovative poetry expressed not only her prowess as a poet, but how she perceived revolutionary concepts like freedom, liberty, and independence as an enslaved African American women in the North.

Moreover, the letters in Wheatley’s collective biography indicate her abhorrence of slavery during a time filled with ideologies like freedom and independence. In one letter, she comments on the contradiction between Christian slaveholders and the so-called philosophical conception of “natural rights” circulating throughout the colonies before and during the Revolution:

> [I] n every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our Modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us... How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for Exercise of oppressive power over others agree,—I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine.¹

Wheatley would eventually be granted her freedom before her death after the Revolution in 1784. Her poetry remains to be a clear example of the power of the pen. Yet above all, her philosophical commentary on revolutionary thought forces contemporary scholars to rethink the implicit hypocrisy in the fight for independence alongside the maintenance of African-American enslavement.

Boston’s Leading Propagandist: 

MERCY OTIS WARREN

By 1775, women of Colonial America comprehended the potential power of the pen, and thus continued a campaign of written works to inspire and organize patriotic action. Poet, political playwright, and satirist Mercy Otis Warren (1728—1814) was one of the Revolution’s leading suppliers of propaganda against British authority before and during the American Revolution. She openly mocked British appointed Governors of the Massachusetts Bay colony, including the infamous Governor Thomas Hutchinson. A glimpse into her poems, political dramas, satire, and personal correspondences indicate her dedication to the cause for liberty and independence. For example, the battle at Lexington and Concord and the actions by the British in 1775 drew sharp criticism (and perhaps, a slightly exaggerated reaction) from Warren:

“The unparalleled barbarity in the late action of Lexington envies that they had forgotten the laws and usages of civilized nations. We have been exaggerated; their brutal fury has certainly led them to perpetuate the most savage acts. I saw yesterday a gentleman who conversed with the brother of a woman cut to pieces in her bed with her new born infant at her side!”

After the Revolution, Mercy Otis Warren began writing a history of the event she just lived through. Published in 1805, Warren’s three-volume history titled The History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution was one of the first histories published by a woman on the topic. Additionally, she was a vocal supporter of the end of slavery and, like Phillis Wheatley, pointed out the “natural rights” of African Americans and the hypocrisy between the fight for liberty and freedom and the continuation of slavery.

Mrs. James Warren (Mercy Otis) (c. 1763)
John Singleton Copley (1738—1815)
Oil on canvas, 126.1 cm x 100.3 cm
Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA 1011.1.Pa18

Bridging Two Worlds: Molly Brant

The Revolutionary Era greatly affected those that dwelled in the North American colonies, but it posed an even more complex challenge to Native American nations. Native American women during this time exercised their political power by rallying for action, whether it was siding with the British or the Colonists. The decisions made by Native American leaders — including the women that participated in political decisions — were made with the hopes of the survival of their culture and civilization. Whether they aligned themselves with the Colonists or aligned themselves with the British, Native American nations arguably faced a two-pronged challenge where the ramifications would have lasting impact.

Mary (Molly) Brant (1736—1796), like Pocahontas, served as a diplomat between her nation and encroaching Europeans. She wielded substantial power as a representative of the Mohawks (a nation apart of the Iroquois Confederacy), whom historically engaged in conflict between European encroachment on their lands since the establishment of the New World. She married British official of Indian Affairs Sir William Johnson in the 1750s, effectively bridging her world as a Mohawk woman with Johnson’s contrasting European perspective. After Johnson’s death in 1774, Brant engaged in Loyalist activities including housing loyalist refugees, supplying weaponry to British soldiers, and engaging in forms of espionage to provide British commanders with the strategic upper-hand. This position of Brant and her fellow Mohawks would fracture the relationship between the other members of the Iroquois Confederacy, and she was subsequently forced to flee to Canada after an Oneida-Colonial attack in 1777.

Molly Brant’s choices understandably remain controversial among historians and Native American communities, yet she acted in favor of a choice she saw as beneficial to the preservation of her nation’s culture during a crossroads of Early North American history. Despite the controversy, the influence and power she exerted within her traditional framework is a premiere example of the agency afforded to Native American women.1

The outbreak of war and the oncoming Revolution greatly disrupted Colonial lives in several ways. Families dispatched their fathers and sons to participate in the war effort; many of whom were not likely to come home. Loyalists, who were Colonists throughout the Colonies whom continued to support the British Government, feared for their lives and were often forced out of their communities.

Women found themselves in a complex situation filled with greater responsibilities during a time of revolutionary fervor. In addition to their previous responsibilities (i.e. cooking, cleaning, and childrearing), women during the American Revolution struggled to efficiently run households and farms by themselves; provide for their families during food shortages with outrageously inflated prices; and deal with the reality of sickness that could manifest to epidemic proportions. Households of known patriots were susceptible to raids by British soldiers. Likewise, loyalist families faced the same danger from frenzied colonial patriots.

Despite these trying times, many revolutionary women found ways to exercise their agency. One of the most powerful (and widely effective) methods was the manipulation of the Colonial economy. Women in Boston, for example, organized economic boycotts; enforced acts of non-consumption against British goods before and during the Revolution; and passionately fought back against war-time food inflation. This point in particular is especially evident in a letter from Abigail Adams to husband John Adams, dated June 31, 1777, analyzed by historian Wendy Martin:

“Abigail Adams tells her husband of the siege of Thomas Boylston’s store by a ‘number of females, some say a hundred, some say more’ who demanded they keys to his warehouse where he kept the coffee that he was selling at exorbitant prices. When Boylston refused to comply with the demand, one of the women ‘seized him by the neck, and tossed him into the cart . . . [they] opened the warehouse, [and] hoisted out the coffee themselves . . .’ She concludes, perhaps with relish, that ‘a large concourse of men stood amazed, silent spectators of the whole transaction.’”

In addition, non-importation publications were widely circulated, such as the one here, published in Boston c. 1770, which calls for the boycott of goods sold by a loyalist in Boston named William Jackson.

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Although it was illegal for women to enlist in the military, they continued to find ways to directly aid the Colonial war effort. Successful attempts of spying and espionage enabled the Colonial Military to prepare and/or sabotage British efforts. Thus, the information gathered by women spies were vital to the success of military strategies. Women spies, compared to male spies, were more successful because they were often not suspected of such acts by British soldiers and authorities. Moreover on some occasions, British soldiers quartered in colonial homes freely discussed confidential information among each other with women in the room, many of whom took advantage of their situation and used it in support of the Patriots. Loyalist women engaged in the same activities. Overall, women spies were extremely important to the war effort, and their actions placed them as vital components in the colonies’ fight for independence.

It was essential for spies during the American Revolution to sharpen their wits and be especially cunning in order to be successful. For example, recent scholarship has uncovered more detail about George Washington’s Culper Ring — also known as the Setauket Spy Ring — and its operations during the British invasion of New York City and Long Island. Those apart of the Culper Ring — mostly men – were remarkably shrewd and calculating. However, much of their success rested upon the crafty nature of a few select Colonial women.

Anna Smith Strong (1740 — 1812) and her husband Judge Selah Strong III were members of Washington’s spy ring when the British invaded New York City and Long Island in August of 1776. When Selah Strong was arrested and held in a British prison ship on suspicions of espionage, Anna remained home. She not only fulfilled her role in the domestic sphere, but also played a key role as a participant in The Culper Ring. Moreover, the Strong Estate was conveniently situated on a high bluff on Long Island. When Anna hung her laundry out to dry, it did not raise suspicions from British officers. To Caleb Brewster and Abraham Woodhull however — both of whom were also members of the Culper Ring — Anne’s laundry configurations, colors, and type of garments indicated certain messages, such as certain amounts of British ships and troops. The information was then transcribed and communicated to the nearby Colonial Military.

Overall, Anna Smith Strong’s role in the Culper Spy Ring is best described by historians Brian Kilmeade and Don Yaeger as the role of a vital satellite to the secret organization: “Anna’s bravery and determination in the face of British oppression demonstrate she had the mettle for espionage. She also had a strong motive to bring about the defeat of the army that had torn apart her family.” Unfortunately, no sketch or painting of Anna Smith Strong exists today. However, her story as a vital component to the Culper Spy Ring is noteworthy, and she received full honors by George Washington for her dedication to the cause. Some historians have gone so far as to perceive her as the prominently mentioned Agent 355 — a popular female agent documented in the Culper Spy Ring, fully unknown and anonymous — but the evidence of such comparisons remains thin. Nevertheless, Anna Smith Strong’s involvement as a spy is a clear example of how revolutionary women actively engaged in their changing world by fulfilling once nontraditional roles during the American Revolution.

2 Kilmeade & Yaeger, 220.
Lydia Barrington Darragh (1729 — 1789), in contrast to Anna Smith Strong, was not apart of a formal spy network, but was a passionate patriot nevertheless. According to her story, British forces advanced into New York and eventually arrived in Philadelphia, PA in mid-1777 to pursue Washington’s retreating troops at Whitemarsh. In the Autumn of 1777, esteemed British officer General Sir William Howe demanded to be quartered in Darragh’s home and use it as an additional meeting area. Although Lydia reluctantly agreed, this venture would pose an ample opportunity to spy on the British within the comfort and familiarity of her own home.

During once such occasion on December 2, 1777, high-ranking British officers held a top-secret and classified meeting in the Darragh’s household, demanding all family members — including Lydia — to be away and in their bedrooms. Bravely, Lydia disobeyed these commands and secretly stowed herself in a closet, listening intently to the meeting. Her fears — as well as those of any other passionate patriot of the time — were validated: British forces were devising a plan to launch a surprise attack on George Washington’s camp in two days at their encampment in Whitemarsh.

In a courageous effort to relay this information to Washington before the surprise attack, Lydia ventured to General Howe’s headquarters and innocently posed as a simple woman in order to obtain a pass to travel to the village of Frankford to purchase flour for baking. Historian Carol Berkins tells it best: “The officer in charge saw a middle-aged matron, carrying an empty flower sack, anxious to provide bread for her family’s table. What he did not see was a cleaver spy with top secret information hidden away within the folds of her dress.” Lydia was issued a permit and immediately ventured to the Colonial encampment. On December 4, 1777 when the British arrived to launch their surprise attack as they had planned days prior, they found Washington’s troops prompt, armed, and ready. Had they not been alarmed, one can imagine the carnage of the British’s surprise attack. Washington’s troops were already badly beaten and discouraged after their failed campaign in New York City and Long Island. Thus, the significance of Lydia Barrington Darragh’s actions are of note. Like Anna Smith Strong, she used her wits to pose as an innocent woman performing her womanly duties, but subsequently engaged in nontraditional actions that aided the Colonial war effort.

Portrait of Lydia Darragh (Unknown date)
Unknown Artist
Photograph of Woodcut, 31.2 cm x 19.1 cm
Courtesy of the Library of Congress, USA
1014.1.Pr18

Background image courtesy of the Library of Congress

Influencing Men in Power: Abigail Adams

The MRW would not be able to put together a comprehensive narrative of women’s roles during the American Revolution without discussing the role and impact of John Adam’s wife, Abigail Adams (1744—1818). Arguably one of American history’s earliest advocates for women’s rights and an avid supporter of the cause for liberty and freedom, Abigail Adams established herself as the advisor to her husband, the politically powerful Founding Father, John Adams.

As stated previously, the Revolution posed the opportunity for great change within the roles and expectations of women in society. Two prominent beliefs of a woman’s place emerged in conflict with each other during this time: on one hand, women were expected to continue fulfilling their duties in separate spheres, delineated from men with no place in politics (or in other words, no involvement in a “man’s world”). The other belief — likely influenced by Revolutionary thought — argued that a woman’s role was central to the maintenance of Revolutionary ideology, and argued beyond past gender distinctions by encouraging women to actively participate in politics. Abigail Adams (as well as other women) is credited with the synthesis of both beliefs — a sort of compromise of the two dichotomies — where the ideal of “Republican Motherhood” emerged. According to historian Linda K. Kerber, Republican Motherhood ideology merged conservative and radical ideas of womanhood together, where “a patriotic woman could unite her seemingly contradictory loyalties to the home and to the state.” Likewise, “the creators and advocates of Republican Motherhood produced the terms and rhetoric in which much of the nineteenth and twentieth-century debate on the proper dimensions of female patriotism would be expressed.” These implications will be addressed later.

While it would be a stretch to suggest that Abigail Adams was the figurehead of later Women’s Movements and the sole-creator of Republican Motherhood ideology, her ability to actively advise her husband is of great significance. Furthermore, in one of many correspondences with John, Abigail pleads that he — as well as his constituents in the Continental Congress — do not forget the ladies of their new country. The extent to which this plea went fulfilled (or unfulfilled) is highly speculative, but nevertheless it indicates a perspective advocating for change in women’s roles in society and politics during Revolutionary America.

“I long to hear that you have declared an independency — 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 favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.”

- Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776 (Page 2)

Diplomacy in the Face of Danger: 
Nanye’hi, Cherokee Beloved Woman

The actions and decisions made by Nanye’hi — or Nancy Ward — of the Cherokee people during the American Revolution have often stirred heated debate, misrepresentation, and controversy due to the decisions made as a premiere diplomat between her people, the British, and the American Colonists. As the Ghighua (“Beloved Woman”) Nanye’hi (1738—1824) possessed great political and social power in Cherokee society before, during, and after the time of the American Revolution. She has been recorded to have believed that the best way to make peace with the Europeans was to coexist and learn their ways. As a result, she married British trader Bryant Ward, renamed herself Nancy, and ultimately learned the traditions of English-Americans a decade prior to the American War for Independence.

During the American Revolution, Nanye’hi’s status as Beloved Woman enabled her to become the de facto ambassador and diplomat between her people, the British, and Colonial Americans, many of whom had begun to encroach on Cherokee lands. The complexities of the American Revolution posed a great challenge to the Cherokee, as it did with other Native American nations. Thus, Nanye’hi’s motives and intentions remain hotly contested by historians and members of the Cherokee nation today. As historian Michelene E. Pesantubbee understands, she “sent trusted messengers to American forts to warn the inhabitants of impending Cherokee attacks, and she was known to offer food to American troops.”

To some, her actions betrayed the sovereignty of her nation; to others, she was the ideal bridge between both worlds and an American patriot. From an objective point of view, Nanye’hi (Nancy) Ward desired to prevent bloodshed and warfare through diplomacy and peaceful coexistence between both her people, the British, and Anglo-Americans. For this, she received honors from both sides. According to Pesantubbee, “to the Cherokee, she was antiywvuiya, one of the real people, and a well-respected, honored leader and culture bearer. To white American settlers she was a friend and ally who protected them from Cherokee warriors.” Whether she be labeled a Cherokee Nationalist or an American Patriot, Nanye’hi’s notable actions during the American Revolution serves to legitimate the ability of Native American women to assert their agency during an unstable time in early North American history.

Sketch of Nanye’hi (Unknown Date)
Unknown Artist
Charcoal on Paper, 31.2 cm x 19.1 cm
Courtesy of the Manataka American Indian Council
1014.2.Pr18

1 Debra Michals, PhD, “Nanye’hi (Nancy Ward),” The National Women’s History Museum, 2015.
The story of Sybil Ludington’s ride is scarcely known in popular memory in comparison to the famous ride of Paul Revere. However, Ludington’s family records indicate that the sixteen-year-old’s ride was much longer than Revere’s as she ventured a total of 40 miles quickly along the roads of Putnam County, New York in April of 1777.

One may wonder: what on earth had brought a sixteen-year-old Colonial young woman out into the night to engage in a ride through the treacherous rough terrain of rural New York? The idea itself is surprising and unheard of, yet the legend of Sybil Ludington (1761-1839) remains true today. According to her story, the teenager was dispatched on a mission of extreme importance by her father, Colonel Henry Ludington of the Continental Army and New York militia, to deliver a call to arms in the defense of Danbury, Connecticut against encroaching British forces. The success of her mission, as historian Carol Berkin points out, was vital to preventing any more military successes to the British in the early stages of the war. To Berkin, “Because of her, the Putnam militia played a critical role in the Danbury battle. Although Governor William Tryon and his redcoats managed to destroy the arms depot at Danbury, the Ludington troops helped Generals Benedict Arnold (before he committed treason) and David Wooster drive the British from the town.” Above all, her actions greatly affected a portion of the outcome of the war in the North.

Comparing the tales of Sybil Ludington and Paul Revere draws striking similarities: both were extremely vital to warning and delivering important messages to their respective targets, and both were mildly successful in their missions. Yet, Paul Revere’s story greatly overshadows Sybil Ludington’s in American popular memory. The numerous reasons as to why Sybil’s ride is so foreign to popular memory continues to add to the importance and the meaning behind this particular exhibition.

Today, the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) have recognized Sybil’s ride as an act of heroism. A statue was erected in her image in New York’s Putnam County in 1961 by artist Anna Hyatt Huntington, and she was featured on a U.S. postage stamp in 1975.

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1 Carol Berkin, Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America’s Independence (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 139.
2 Berkin, Revolutionary Mothers, 139.
A True Hero and Patriot: 
THE BRAVERY OF MAMMY KATE

Although the American War of Independence affected the entire 13 colonies, it played out slightly different in the South than in the North. African American Slavery — the backbone of a developing Southern economy — posed as a blunt contradiction to the Revolutionary ideologies of American Patriotism. Racist slaveholders feared slave insurrections and therefore dismissed any contradictory arguments, while others freed their slaves following the war. All in all, enslaved African Americans (similar to Native American communities) faced a set of complex challenges during the American Revolution.

Furthermore, African American women experienced inter-sectional hardship based on the negative attitudes towards race and gender during eighteenth century America. Despite this adversity, many affirmed their agency in heroic acts that put their lives in danger. One such example is the heroism of Mammy Kate (1740—1815). The leading credible authority that depicts Mammy Kate’s bravery is historian John h. McIntosh’s The Official History of Elbert County, 1790-1935, published in 1940. McIntosh explains that Mammy Kate was the slave of Governor Stephew Heard, a patriot residing in Georgia. He had been captured and sentenced to death by Tories, and in an effort to save his life, Mammy Kate ventured to the prison where he was being held with a clever plan. McIntosh tells it best:

“One morning, carrying on her head a large covered basket, she presented herself at the fort and asked the sentry on duty for the privilege of securing her master’s soiled linen. The request was carelessly granted and the guard offered the information that ‘the damned Rebel would soon be hung.’ She entered the cell, secreted her master, who was of small statue, in the basket, covered him with clothing, and conveyed him from the place of incarceration on her head, calmly sauntering past the sentry, and several British and Tory officers, who stood idly about the quadrangle.”

Following her brave act of heroism, Governor Heard granted Mammy Kate her freedom, “a deed to a small tract of land and a comfortable four-roomed house, but she [remained] with the Heard family until her death.” Yet, Mammy Kate’s bravery can be admired in the fact that she acted with valor and rescued the person who owned her as property. She was not obligated to do so. Her actions offer a clear example of the agency and bravery of an African American women of the American Revolution. Today, the Sons of the American Revolution (SAR) have recognized Mammy Kate as a true and selfless patriot during the American Revolution.

2 McIntosh, The Official History of Elbert County, 24.

Sketch of Mammy Kate (c. 1810)
Unknown Artist
Charcoal on Parchment, 31.2 cm x 19.1 cm
Courtesy of the Georgia Historical Society
1003.2.Pr18

MUSEUM OF REVOLUTIONARY WOMEN
The Ultimate Sacrifice: Disguised Women in the Military

Strikingly similar to the notable story of Mulan in Ancient China, few women disguised themselves as men, joined Colonial Regiments, and actively engaged in combat. One of these women was Deborah Sampson Gannett (1760—1827) — known to her comrades as a disguised Robert Shurtleff.¹

Deborah’s early years were not ideal, and from an early age she was forced to learn how to care for herself in a world full of gendered expectations. Shortly after her birth, her father abandoned her mother and other siblings. At the age of five, she was given to other households for care as her mother could no longer provide for her children. For a majority of her early years until she turned eighteen, Deborah was forced into servitude to the family of Benjamin Thomas, a Puritan deacon and farmer. As historian Elizabeth Evans points out, it was Deborah’s time in servitude that fostered an “awareness of her own strength and individuality, an identification with nature, and a strong will . . . She challenged the prevailing Puritan attitudes that a good farm woman never strayed far from the kitchen and that a girl didn’t have to be educated.”²

By the time she was legally free from servitude (c. 1780), the American army desperately needed soldiers and offered cash bounties as an incentive. Deborah originally enlisted under the name Timothy Thayer, but was soon discovered when she did not appear at roll call; she was quickly given a stern warning and stripped of her bounty. In 1782, she signed up again using her brother’s name Robert Shurtleff and, disguised as a man, pledged to three years in the 4th Massachusetts Regiment under the leadership of Colonel Henry Jackson.

Throughout her time as a disguised soldier, she engaged in several heated skirmishes with British forces despite the defeat of General Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781. In one particular exchange, she and her company of thirty soldiers were ambushed by armed men. When the gunfire ceased and the smoke cleared, she was among those wounded. Surely, this was the moment where her true sex would be discovered, and the penalties would most likely be far more severe than her previous stern warning.

What happens next is best described by the words of Deborah herself. In an address in 1802 in various towns in New England, Deborah Sampson told her story (see the next page).

“I considered this as a death wound, or as being equivalent to it; as it must, I thought, lead to the discovery of my sex. Covered with blood from head to foot, I told my companions I fear I had received a mortal wound; and I begged them to leave me to die on the spot: preferring to take the small chance I should in this case have of surviving, rather than to be carried to the hospital. To this my comrades would not consent; but one of them took me before him on his horse and in this painful manner I was borne six miles to the hospital of the French army, at a place called Crompond. On coming in sight of the hospital, my heart again failed me. In a paroxysm of despair, I actually drew my pistol from the holster, and was about to put an end to my life. That I did not proceed to the fatal act, I can ascribe only to the interposition of Divine Mercy.

The French surgeon, on my being brought in, instantly came. He was alert, cheerful, humane. ‘How you lose so much blood at this early hour? Be any bone broken?’ was his first salutation; presenting me and the other wounded men of our party with two bottles of choice wine. My head having been bound up, and a change of clothing becoming a wounded soldier being ready, I was asked by the too inquisitive French surgeon whether I had any other wound. He had observed my extreme paleness, and that I limped in attempting to walk. I readily replied in the negative: it was a plump falsehood! ‘Sit you down lad; your boot say you fib!’ said the surgeon, noticing that the blood still oozed from it. He took off my boots and stockings with his own hands with great tenderness, and washed my leg to the knee. I then told him I would retire, change my clothing, and if any other wound should appear, I would inform him.

Meanwhile I had procured in the hospital a silver probe a little curbed at the end, a needle, some lint, a bandage, and some of the same kind of salve that had been applied to the wound in my head. I found that the ball had penetrated my thigh about two inches, and the wound was still moderately bleeding. The wine had revived me, and God, by his kind care, watched over me. At the third attempt I extracted the ball.

This operation over, the blood was staunched, and my regimentals, stiff enough to stand alone, had been exchanged for a loose, thin wrapper, when I was again visited by the surgeon. In his watchful eye I plainly read doubts. I told him that all was well; that I felt much revived and wished to sleep . . .

Before the wound in my thigh was half healed, I rejoined the army on the lines. But had the most hardy soldier been in the condition I was when I left the hospital, he would have been excused from military duty.”

“Robert Shurtleff” would be honorably discharged in 1783 after being discovered in Philadelphia when she fell ill. About a year later, Deborah petitioned the Massachusetts State Legislature for withheld pay, to which they confirmed and later awarded her for her “female heroism.” Although her experience is unique, Deborah’s story greatly breaks the mold of eighteenth century expectations of women during wartime. Her determination and fierce will — like many of the women previously discussed — serves as just one example of female wartime heroism and agency during the American Revolution.

Background Image: “Deborah Sampson delivers a letter to General George Washington following her treatment for illness, which subsequently led to her discharge from the U.S. Army.”


2 Evans, Weathering the Storm, 317.
Aiding the Continental Regiments: 

**WOMEN SUPPORTING THE ARMY**

British and American armies had respective bodies of women that followed the army closely. The reasons for such an engagement are complex. The most obvious reasons these women posed were the very real fear of tending to the domestic sphere alone and experience the hardships of the home front. As historian Carol Berkin points out, these reasons also included “loneliness, poverty, fear of starvation, and [the real threat] of rape or death at the hands of hostile invading troops.”\(^1\) Although the reasons of these women for following the armies seemed to enforce the eighteenth century ideal of female dependency, the contributions made by army women should not be discounted from modern perspectives as they had been from their contemporaries, some of whom shared General George Washington’s annoyance at the women who “sought refuge in [his] camps.”\(^2\) Yet in dire and emergency situations such as wartime, women were able to move out of traditional society and into a temporary reprieve such as the Continental Army where their gender roles became increasingly blurred.\(^3\)

While many women saw the opportunity to follow British or American armies as a safe-guard, others viewed it as an opportunity to exert their patriotism by directly supporting the morale of those that fought in battle. They fulfilled roles such as washerwomen, particularly for the soldiers who had no knowledge of proper washing. They additionally cooked meals for soldiers, utilized their skills as seamstresses to modify ruined uniforms, and cared for the sick and injured as nurses.

However, wage disparity — a topic still relevant today — influenced the wages of camp women, especially nurses. Berkin further observes, “For their endless rounds of sweeping, emptying bedpans and chamber pots, bathing patients, and disinfecting the wards, nurses were to receive one ration and twenty-four cents per day — about 10 percent of what surgeons and male attendants made.”\(^4\) Perhaps the only group of women who fared far greater than the others in the rugged army atmosphere were the wives of army commanders and generals; their roles were primarily bolstering the morale of their husbands, rather than engaging in tasks like washing, sewing, and cooking.

Nevertheless, camp followers provided immense support for their respective armies. The roles these women fulfilled were important — if not, vital — to the continued war effort. For some, following the army was imperative to their survival in a world of female dependency and little freedom. For others, providing essential functions for the army was their way of actively engaging in the fight for independence without picking up a musket.

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\(^2\) Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, 55.


\(^4\) Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, 58.
The Legend of Molly Pitcher

In some cases, women not only performed essential duties in army camps but provided additional support during times of engaged combat. A similar story is the legend of Molly Pitcher, which has situated itself within the popular memory of the American Revolution. As the tale goes, Molly Pitcher took the spot of her husband at the Battle of Monmouth in New Jersey on June 28, 1778 after he collapsed of heat stroke. She continued cannon fire to the amazement of other camp followers, and ultimately became a symbol of female patriotism in the face of adversity, and a figurehead for female empowerment.

Historians have picked apart the legend of Molly Pitcher endlessly. Some scholars contend that Molly Pitcher was one of the many nurses who provided tremendous nursing care during the battle.¹ Others suggest the legend is false, citing that the conditions would have been too extraordinary for a simple woman of the time to successfully pick up the reigns and return fire. Others point to the ambiguous journal entries of Joseph Plumb Martin, the only eyewitness account of a female cannoneer at the Battle of Monmouth, who goes on to describe a similar story to that of the legend of Molly Pitcher but does not truly identify the woman at the helm.²

Yet the question remains: was there a real Molly Pitcher, or was she a fabrication of female patriotism? The same historians who examine the legend are unsure themselves, for written and oral sources are sometimes unreliable. If scholars look at the legend of Molly Pitcher in a contextual perspective, perhaps she is a metaphor for the woman who supported the army — the nurses, the cooks, the seamstresses, and the water-runners. This theory seems to be the most plausible, as it strikes a middle-ground between the myth and history. Despite the gaps of unknowns, scholars know for sure that there were women in the camps who provided support on and off the battlefield.

Part 3 & Conclusions:

Post-Revolutionary America: 1781 and Beyond

Background image courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society

MUSEUM OF REVOLUTIONARY WOMEN
Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness: BUT FOR WHOM?

Following the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783, the War for American Independence was over. The original thirteen colonies and a collection of rag-tag military veterans and recruits had successfully staged one of the largest rebellions against colonial authority in Imperial History. It is truly remarkable how thirteen distinct colonies — all with different interests, cultures, and policies — were able to unite in a common cause and wage a colonial uprising that led to the defeat of the far-superior British military. At the forefront of the charge stood not only the Founders and soldiers who fought the battles, but the ordinary people who dealt with the war on the home front. In that rabble, there were women. The roles, actions, and choices made by Anglo-Saxon, African American, and Native American women during such a turbulent time in early American history demonstrates their clear capacity to engage with the world around them.

Freedom, liberty, and independence meant different things to different women. To Anglo-Saxon women, it was an opportunity to break from the gender roles and perspectives carried over from Anglo traditions, and to be awarded a say in politics and fulfill the role of being in a “republican motherhood.” For African American women, there was immense hope that the rhetoric of enslavement — especially in how the Founders framed their reasoning for breaking away from King George III — would carry over into their own lives. Unfortunately, African Americans would have to wait another century to officially shed the vestiges of slavery. The inherent contradictions that are evident to our modern eye — and to those of the era, especially Phillis Wheatley — indicate a passed opportunity to rid slavery at the turn of independence. For Native American women, the outcome of the American War for Independence posed a greater risk of increased encroachment on Native land holdings, and the overpowering influence of Anglo-American ideas and expectations surrounding gender roles.

Despite the various meanings of the tenants of American Independence, women of all backgrounds understood that they were placed at the crux between traditional society and the potential for a newer, more liberating society as a product of the American Revolution. The American Revolution — including all of its ideas and philosophies — set the stage for the next century. The question remains: when would the ideas of freedom and liberty be applied to all women?
Setting the Stage for Later Women's Movements

Following the American Revolution, Anglo-Saxon women saw society begin to revert back to its traditional perspectives on gender inferiority and specific gender roles. Those that participated in the American Revolution most likely found this troubling; would it truly be possible to revert back to traditional society after such an upheaval like the American Revolution? To a certain extent, society did; as historian Jan Lewis understands, “[Ultimately], the Revolution would not make women full citizens of the new nation. The occasional outspoken woman [like Abigail Adams] raised the issue of female citizenship, but it was not seriously considered.” Yet that is not to suggest that women simply retracted their revolutionary fervor and quietly went back to their lives. Following the American Revolution, educated Anglo-Saxon women began writing. They wrote poetry, reflections, personal narratives, essays, and even histories of what they had just experienced. Other women began telling stories and oral histories. Furthermore, the Revolution brought change in the form of education: literacy and education for Anglo-Saxon women expanded significantly, which slowly influenced and improved their lives and social status. This is especially evident in the works produced that analyze women’s status following the American Revolution.

Educated and outspoken women began pondering the exclusion of women in the newly formed American democracy and the overall idea of republicanism. In her 1798 series of essays, Judith Sargent Murray — under the pseudonym “Constantia” — laments:

“From conspicuous rewards of merit, the female world seem injudiciously excluded. To man, the road of preferment is thrown open — the bar, the pulpit, the medical center. Glory crowns the military hero, the husbandman, the merchant, the statesman … But the sex [women], agreeably to existing regulations, can enjoy but secondary or reflected fame.”

The change in women’s status and political, social, and economic equality would be a slow (and is still arguably still present in American society today). In the following century, women would continue questioning Revolutionary ideals in conjunction to the status of women. For example, when she was arrested in 1873 for voting illegally, Susan B. Anthony replied with revolutionary implications and themes to the judge who found her guilty in the Circuit Court in Rochester, New York:

“Yes, your honor, I have many things to say; for in your ordered verdict of guilty, you have trampled under foot every vital principle of our government. My natural rights, my civil rights, my political rights, my judicial rights, are all alike ignored. Robbed of the fundamental privilege of citizenship, I am degraded from the status of a citizen to that of a subject; and not only myself individually, but all of my sex, are, by your honor’s verdict, doomed to political subjection under this, so-called, form of government!”

Society may not have changed dramatically for women after the American Revolution, but it certainly influenced the following decades and — to some degree — the Women’s Rights and Suffrage Movement of the late nineteenth, early twentieth century. After all, those women who sat down at the Seneca Convention in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848 wrote their own version of the Declaration of Independence, and effectively started their own revolution with the same zeal of the Founders seventy-two years prior.

Demanding Fundamental Freedoms: Mum Bett’s Legal Suit Against Slavery

The promises secured in the Declaration of Independence and the eventual ratification of the United States Constitution provided hope for enslaved African Americans, especially African American women. Similar to Lucy Terry Prince’s keen understanding of the law and Phillis Wheatley’s observations about the contradiction between revolutionary principles and the continuation of African American enslavement, Elizabeth Freeman — best known as Mum Bett — provides a dramatic example of one of post-revolutionary America’s fight for freedom and the beginning stages of the dismantling of African American slavery.

Elizabeth Freeman (Mum Bett) (1742—1829) was born into slavery and served as slave — primarily for Colonel John Ashley — in New England for a majority of her life. Following an incident with her master’s wife, Mum Bett contacted Theodore Segewick to help her sue for her freedom from Ashley. In what would become known as Brom & Bett v. Ashley, the 1781 Court Case argued for Mum Bett’s freedom in the basis of the Massachusetts Constitution — ratified in 1780 — which outlawed slavery. As historian Johnetta Cole puts it, “the suit ended with the jury setting Elizabeth Freeman free, and ordering her former slave master to pay her thirty shillings damages.”¹ When asked about where she had gotten the idea to sue for her freedom, Mum Bett is recorded to have said, “The Bill of Rights said that all [in the nation] were born free and equal, and since I’m not a dumb beast, I’m certainly one of the nation.”² Cases like Mum Bett’s are unique, but they set the stage for the later abolition movement and raised the issue of slavery in political discourse. Her bravery and shrewd intuition led to one of the first court cases involving slavery in the newly formed United States.

A Changed World: Native American Women in Post-Revolutionary America

Perhaps one of the greatest tragedies in North American history is the slow decline and loss of sovereignty of Native American communities following the end of the American Revolution. With the establishment of the United States of America, Anglo-American norms and traditions began to greatly affect Native American nations, especially the Iroquois and Cherokee. Nations such as these — which were the homes of prominent Native American women such as Molly Brant and Nancy Ward — became increasingly patrilineal in an attempt to assimilate and coexist with the newly formed United States. Historian Carol Berkin notes that notable male leaders of post-revolutionary American history like Handsome Lake of the Seneca Iroquois “urged his people to re-create their families and communities in the English image in order to survive.” Moreover, gender roles in Native American economics were reversed; women were removed from traditional agricultural work beside men and were instead strongly encouraged to move inside their homes to engage in womanly activities such as spinning and sewing. Additionally, as Anglo-American Christianity began to take root in Native American communities, the once-prominent spiritual role of Native American women gradually diminished. Although Native American communities in post-revolutionary America experienced numerous disruptions from American Colonists, the gradual change in Native American gender roles was the most significant and immediate transformation experienced by a group of women following the end of the American War of independence.

Whether they sided with the British or the Americans during the American Revolution, Native American communities and nations faced substantial losses following the War of Independence. With American colonists ignoring treaties, traveling West, and encroaching on Native American landholdings, Native American leaders faced a extreme hardship. Historian Gary Nash further notes, “memory of the long and bloody post-revolutionary era lives on yet today” in Native American communities. For women, they faced greater hardship at the threat of their culture and their roles in their respective societies. Cherokee women in particular — following the legacy of Nanye’hi — petitioned their male chiefs “to not sell any more land to white settlers. ‘Your mothers, your sisters ask and beg you,’ they wrote, in a humble manner that Beloved Women would not have recognized as their own.” However, the transformation and reversal of gender roles in Native American communities was already well underway.

She Speaks for Her Clan (c. 1994)
Dorothy Sullivan, Cherokee (1938—present)
Oil on canvas, 100.3 cm x 126.1 cm
Courtesy of the Eastern Band Cherokee Nation, N.C.
1006.1.Pa18

2 Berkin, Revolutionary Mothers, 119.
4 Berkin, Revolutionary Mothers, 119.
Conclusion: Revolutionary Legacies

Overall, the American Revolution affected Anglo-Saxon, African American, and Native American women in different ways. The revolutionary ideas we commonly associate with the American Revolution — such as life, liberty, and freedom — meant different things to different people, particularly women, and thus shaped how they would move forward in post-revolutionary America.

Furthermore, the American War of Independence influenced the decisions and choices made by Anglo-Saxon, African American, and Native American women. The choices they made before, during, and after the war prove that they were active participants in the world around them. Throughout this exhibition, the MRW has attempted to highlight the agency of these women to not necessarily dismantle previous conceptions of the American War of Independence and the establishment of the nation, but rather provide a perspective that uncovers a histories relevant to America’s founding. Women’s History has enabled historians to investigate history in new ways, and the MRW has attempted to bridge this new innovative perspective into the realm of public history by providing a virtual tour and a detailed companion catalogue. Above all, the MRW hopes that viewer’s knowledge of the American War of Independence and the role of all women has been expanded greatly, and may be put into context with other pieces of American history.

A Message from the Curator:

Thank you for taking the time to read through my Master’s Capstone Companion Catalog. The inspiration for this project stemmed directly from my own interests as a historian in Colonial America, Gender Studies, and Public History. The creation of this project was an attempt to marry these interests together to produce a body of work that not only captures my understanding of the topics covered throughout my Graduate Studies, but also my commitment and passion to the study and profession of history. I greatly appreciate your time, and hope I have produced a work that inspires you to widen your own perspective when investigating history.

Best regards,

Diana K. Batchelor, MA
The State University of New York College at Brockport History Department
Class of 2018


Snyder, Terri L. “Refiguring Women in the Early American History.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (July 2012): 421-450.
