



Liberty's Daughters:



Did the American Revolution

Empower Women?

Historians debate about whether or not the American Revolution empowered women. In the eighteenth century, even free women did not have the same rights as men. Although a few property-owning colonial women could vote, most free women were considered dependents of their fathers or their husbands, and so could neither vote, hold office, or even control their own property. While it was true that married men could not legally dispose of family property without first obtaining the permission of their wives (who were required to sign off on their right of dower), wives rarely withheld their signatures. Husbands had rights to women's wages, the right to use corporal punishment to control their wives' behavior, and rights to guardianship of children. Moreover, it would be many, many years before any of that changed. Women in Connecticut did not achieve the full voting rights until 1920, more than a century and a half after their foremothers first produced homespun in protest of the Stamp Act. And the United States has yet to pass an Equal Rights Amendment. Clearly, the Revolution did not result in equality. Nevertheless, some historians have argued that it did move the needle — that it nudged America a little closer to equality. And, conversely, other historians argue that it didn't. Let's look at these arguments.



R. F. Zogbaum (artist), "Reading the Declaration of Independence, City Hall Square, New York City" (1897), in Benson John Lossing, et al, eds., *Harper's Encyclopaedia of United States History, From 458 A.D. to 1906* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1907), v. 3, facing p. 38. Many artists have, over the years, interpreted this event. Zogbaum imagined the patriot troops as all dressed in Continental uniforms, which would not have been the case. He also omitted the camp followers and the citizens of New York — a kind of a white-washing of the event. No contemporary images exist.

Participation Meant Empowerment

An argument made by some historians, including Mary Beth Norton in her 1980 book, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*, is that it wasn't just the language of the Revolution that set the stage for a subsequent women's rights movement, but also that the vital participation of women in the revolutionary struggle led to their increased empowerment. The affluent white men who led the Revolution needed women, just as they needed poor white men, free Blacks, and even enslaved and indigenous Americans, to win independence. But unlike those other groups, women were needed because they possessed special domestic skills that most men lacked. Patriot women could make homespun — in addition to organizing patriot spinning bees, raising money for supplies, writing newspaper articles (Massachusetts's Mercy Otis Warren was an example), becoming camp followers, and even seeing combat. When the Revolution was over, some of these same women, like Massachusetts's Judith Sargent Murray, used their newfound political awareness and practiced militancy to take up the cause of women's rights. Before the Revolution, Norton writes, women in Connecticut and the rest of the Western World were consigned to the "private sphere" of domesticity, their skills and accomplishments important to their families, but not part of the wider "public sphere" of patriarchal politics and capitalist economics. But the Revolution changed that. Women's domestic skills, such as spinning and weaving, became vital to the patriots' victory, and women (and domesticity) moved, not fully but partially, from the private sphere to the public. "The war," writes Norton, "necessarily broke down the barrier which seemed to insulate women from the realm of politics, for they, no less than men, were caught up in the turmoil that enveloped the entire populace." Norton does not say that the Revolution brought full equality for women, however. Rather, she sees it as a first step — that once women had entered the public sphere, even if only partially, it would not be possible for men entirely to push them back into the private sphere. "The ironies of this formulation were manifest," Norton writes. "On the one hand, society had at last formally recognized women's work as valuable. No longer was domesticity denigrated; no longer was the feminine sphere subordinated to the masculine, nor were women regarded as inferior.... But, on the other hand, the republican definition of womanhood, which began as a marked step forward, grew ever more restrictive as the decades passed. Women's domestic and maternal role came to be seen as so important that it was believed women sacrificed their femininity if they attempted to be more (or other) than wives and mothers." Despite her reservations, though, Norton sees the Revolution as a step forward for women — a time when women's domestic skills, such as spinning and weaving, took on greater political and social significance. **"In the prerevolutionary world," she concludes, "no one bothered to define domesticity: the private realm remained unimportant.... In the postrevolutionary world, [however] the social significance of household and family was recognized, and simultaneously women began to be able to choose different ways of conducting their lives."**

The Declaration of Independence as a Democratic Document

Most Americans are familiar with the preamble to the Declaration of Independence. Justifying independence, in 1776 Congress wrote: **"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."** At the time, Congress was struggling to build widespread support for the Revolution. A third of Americans were loyalists, fundamentally opposed to independence. Another third were undecided. Only a third were firm patriots. Thus, a key purpose of the Declaration was to win over the undecideds, to create a broad revolutionary coalition, a majority movement that could win the War for Independence that was already raging. The promise of equality was an important part — probably the most important part — of building that coalition.

To understand the significance of the Declaration, imagine yourself at this important event in history: Congress had sent a new, printed copy of the Declaration to General George Washington, who was preparing to defend New York City from an overwhelmingly powerful British invasion force. Congress suggested that Washington have the Declaration read to his troops, a suggestion he wholeheartedly supported. (Other generals, in other locations, did the same thing.) Imagine the scene. The ragtag patriot army was drawn up at attention. Behind it stood camp followers, mostly poor women who served as the army's unofficial nurses, seamstresses, and cooks. Behind them gathered the citizens of New York City, curious about this new Declaration. The army was diverse. It consisted of affluent officers, resplendent in their blue-and-buff uniforms; regular Continentals, most of whom were propertyless men without uniforms, but some of them were enslaved New Englanders, promised freedom if they joined the Continental army; and militia units, mostly men from the "middling" who thought more like civilians than soldiers. The gathered civilians included men and women, masters and servants, free and enslaved. What do you think each person thought when they heard "all men are created equal," that everyone had a right to their own lives, to be free, and to "pursue" (work at) making themselves happy? (In 18th-century English, "men" could be interpreted as meaning either adult males or a broader "mankind.")

In the years following the Revolution, many of the Americans who had joined the coalition increasingly came to regard the Declaration as a solemn promise that the goal of the Revolution was equality and liberty for all — in other words, democracy. One of many examples of how the Revolution was influencing women's thoughts came a few months before the Declaration was passed, but when the language of equality was already current: Abigail Adams's now-famous March 31, 1776 letter to her husband John, when she wrote, "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." On April 14, John replied to Abigail, "We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient -- that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent -- that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented." A more public example of the power of equality is found in the **Declaration of Sentiments**, drafted by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and passed by attendees at the first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls, NY, in 1848, and which deliberately copied the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." While Thomas Jefferson and the other members of the Continental Congress who had passed the Declaration of Independence did not really mean to include women, enslaved people, indigenous people, and others, many members of those groups believed they were included nevertheless. Once given, promises cannot easily be taken back.