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Teaching American History  
A More Perfect Union  
Summer 2010

**Revolutionary Mothers: An Examination of Women's Roles During the American Revolution.**

The role of women in the American Revolution is often overlooked. The bravery of men like George Washington, Paul Revere and John Adams are the primary feature of many historical publications. As America embarked on a war in which the battles were to be fought in the towns and fields of its citizens, women would need to respond to the various needs and responsibilities of that war. Carol Berkin's book *Revolutionary Mothers* examines the role women played in the fight for America's independence. Their actions truly influenced the course of the history.

Societal norms during the 1700's dictated that women were to obey their husband. They were the property of their mate and it would have been a rare feat for a woman to publically demonstrate the kind of bravery needed to assist in the fight for independence. As Berkin stated in *Revolutionary Mothers*, "The ideal woman of the farmhouse was obedient, faithful, frugal, fertile, and industrious- or the ideal woman of the eighteenth-century parlor was obedient, charming, chaste, and modest." Although these character traits were rarely fully realized the expectation for women still existed. As a woman's day was filled with household chores the core of her existence was to be her husband's helpmate.

As the American Revolution began to unfold, Berkin points out that the limits of the notions of helpmate and surrogate husband begin to be stretched. Women start to protest against the unfair British policies and they, "begin to test their political voice."

No longer could women afford to be solely concerned with issues that only pertained to their family, they now began to “think nationally.” Mothers, daughters and sisters took personal stock in the outcome of the war and began to view themselves as partners in protest rather than genteel bystanders. Although many women yearned for a return to “normalcy” their lives would never be the same again. The opportunity to prove their assertive and independent abilities would forever change the role of women in American society. *Revolutionary Mothers* pointed out the fact that their first act of bravery was the deviation from societal expectations. The simple act of thinking differently, acting differently, developing a voice for opinions and of acting in a way that was self-sacrificing was indeed a true demonstration of courage.

The shift from household caretaker to political activist began subtly by modern day standards. Instead of enjoying the luxury of English made goods such as cloth and paper and tea, woman began to boycott British goods. Many women further realized the lessons learned from past protests. The Stamp Act protests taught them that “united action was more powerful than individual responses and that non-importation and non-consumption were the most powerful weapons in the arsenal of resistance.” As boycotts grew, committees formed and encouraged woman to expand the list of goods that they would refuse to purchase. That list included coaches and carriages, cordage, sugar, gloves, fabric and shoes. The power of the purse string can truly influence political decisions. Some women grew even bolder and at great risk to their reputations, they began to sign their names to documents that encouraged protest. Since a woman’s name rarely appeared in print, most likely due to society’s pressure for women to maintain a sense of modesty, this was a courageous step. In Boston near 300 women were willing

to put their names on a petition promoting the boycott of British goods that appeared in the *Boston Evening Post*. As the actions of these “rebellious” women became more well known a sense of public support began to grow, which in turn fueled the actions of woman. The fact that homespun became a badge of honor and that publically advertised spinning bees were allowed and sponsored by respected ministers bolstered the confidence of the boycotters.

This newly discovered confidence in themselves, along with the fear of loosing the lifestyle that they so cherished, drove women more to the forefront of this political debate. As Esther Reed of Philadelphia wrote, “Everything that is dear to us is at stake.”

As the men of the colonies went off to battle, the women they left behind had new challenges to face. Women became the people responsible for maintaining the home and farm. Keeping the home and business in good order would make the efforts of the men worth their sacrifice. For many they would need to take on this task alone. Not only did they have to take care of the children and maintain the household, but now they were thrust in to the position of managing a shop or tending to a farm. Many women had little experience in this realm of colonial society and they needed to do this at a time when the war caused prices to spiral out of control and everyday necessities became scarce. One of the heroic acts of time was the resourcefulness women. They found a way to replace items no longer available with ones that they could find or produce themselves; thorns became pins and walnut ash replaced salt. Women shared their ideas with one another so all could benefit. These simple acts of survival in the face of adversity were remarkable.

When women felt used or mistreated, they took action. Abigail Adams reported on an incident in Massachusetts where a large group of females accosted an unscrupulous

merchant. This act sent a message to others that price gouging would not be tolerated by the “weaker” sex.

Carol Bergin mentions a phenomenon that began to occur as women continued to foster their own level of responsibility in society. Berkin claims that the way women looked at their role shifted from “servant like” to one of ownership. Woman started off by referring to the family farm as “your farm” in letters to their husbands. Over time the terminology shifted to “our farm.” In the end as one wife put it, “it is my farm.” Women were taking pride in their efforts.

Despite their pride women had to endure the agonizing reality that everything they and their husbands or fathers worked for could be taken away in an instant. Armies on both sides would loot home for the supplies they desperately needed. Women dealt with the reality that they could be raped and tortured. When the soldiers arrived they were powerless to protect their property. As women fought to save what they could and to protect their children, some were asked to do even more. Women were asked to produce uniforms for the continental troops. Women gathered to make saltpeter for the troops and would go door to door collecting metal for cannon shot and musket balls. Women volunteered to care for sick and wounded soldiers. With disease running rampant through camps the exposure to small pox was a reality. Women even went to possibly one of the most dangerous places during the war. The notorious British prison ships in New York Harbor were not even out of a woman’s domain. Elizabeth Burgin risked her own life to bring food to the captured American soldiers on board. Whether it was the juggling of all the domestic chores or the care and well being of the troops, it was women who were there to fulfill those jobs.

The women who stayed home to mind farm and shop were certainly a brave group, yet other women for a variety of reasons, choose to leave home in order to follow the troops into battle. The women who became camp followers faced challenges of their own. Their service to our country is remarkable.

What is a woman to do when you are faced with starvation, homelessness and when the fear of rape by the hands of the enemy occupies your every thought? When some women were at their lowest point they committed the ultimate act of independency. They chose to become a “camp follower.” Although this was a position that many generals referred to as a “nuisance”, it was one that provided much needed support to armies in the field. The majority of camp followers were women who had few other options in life. They were lonely, scared and desperate. In return for some degree of safety these women (and sometimes their children) would trail behind the troops, offering to cook, do laundry and care for the wounded. For these services they would be able to share a tent and receive a portion of military rations. As Berkin wrote, “the military rations they received might be small and the conditions in the camp dismal, but meager meals and shared tents were preferable to no food or shelter at all.”

Despite the hardships these women proved that they could endure the marching, cold and discomfort faced by the men. Although, many of the camp followers were looked down upon, they did earn a measure of respect as the soldiers watched these women carry heavy loads through the snow without complaint.

Even George Washington had to admit that the presence of camp followers served a valuable purpose. The presence of women certainly reduced the rate of desertion. Washer women reduced the spread of lice, as it is apparent hygiene was not an important

issue for the soldiers. Women were often recruited to serve as nurses, tending to the injured and ill. Nurses worked long hours with little pay and faced the dangers of exposure to deadly diseases.

Some women were not made to follow. There are several reported cases where women were willing to take the next step in serving during wartime. Although illegal, some women were willing to disguise themselves as men and enlist as a soldier. Not only would they face the horrific nature of war head on, but they also ran the risk of being discovered and their reputation soiled. For some the risk was worth it, and the call to fight for independence was simply too strong. Some, like Deborah Sampson were rewarded for their bravery with a military pension; others were just disregarded or disgraced.

There is no doubt that the contributions to the American Revolution, made by women were both brave and selfless. As the war ended and American began to enjoy life without the sound of cannon fire, women could not simply return to the traditional roles they had had before the Revolution. Carol Berkin show the reader in exceptional detail just how important a role women played. Whether it was organizing boycotts, spying on the enemy, caring for the wounded or picking up a gun to join the fight, one has to wonder if victory was even possible without the efforts of these Revolutionary Mothers. These “mothers” had seized the opportunity to move beyond the position of their husband’s helpmates. A course was now set that women had proved a higher level of worth in American society. This role will continue through history as women gain the level of equality they so richly deserve.