

Revolutionary Women

Portraits of Life in the Thirteen Colonies

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A valuable skill for students of social studies is to be able to analyze and evaluate primary source material.¹ I have created a lesson plan that includes an overview of the social conditions of women who lived during the American Revolution, brief portraits of the lives of six women from that era, and primary source material drawn from their personal letters or publications.² Students are given the information below, and then asked to reflect on the commonality and diversity of life experience for women in that time and place.

Women's Lives, ca. 1776

In the late eighteenth century, most white women were married by the age of sixteen, usually to a farmer, and bore from five to ten children. Life was rigidly determined by gender. Men completed one set of chores, women another. Many girls did not attend school, but did work (including caring for younger brothers and sisters) around the house and farm. Women spun, sewed, cooked, baked, tended gardens and orchards, milked cows, butchered farm animals, cured meat, churned butter, made cheese, and worked in the fields at harvest time. They made most of the clothing and household items such as candles, blankets, and curtains. Especially on frontier farms, most of the household items were created by a woman's hands.

Daughters were expected to grow up to be "modest, retiring, chaste, and sweet;"³ women to obey their husbands; and men to

be tender and loving to their wives. There were exceptions, however, to this general picture. One Virginian made note of women who fought back if taunted, went to cockfights, and traveled around the countryside unchaperoned.

In the South, a wealthy young woman was considered a prize in marriage. Widows, especially wealthy ones, usually did not remain single very long. But even for the "aristocratic" white woman living a plantation, life was often physically demanding as she might oversee the preparation of meals and maintenance of the house, manage the activities of slaves, deliver babies, nurse the sick, and educate children, not to mention giving birth herself, often with little rest between pregnancies.

Conditions were the most difficult for slave women. Their marriages were not recognized as legal or important by their owners, and they could be sold away. Female slaves usually experienced harsh working conditions; pregnancies were frequent, maternity leaves unknown, and death during childbirth a common experience. Some exhausted mothers accidentally suffocated their babies because they fell asleep while nursing.⁴ Although their masters and owners must have known that hard physical labor was not good for pregnant or nursing mothers, such risks were often ignored so that a cash crop could be rapidly harvested.

Many immigrants came to America as indentured servants and were often not much better off than slaves, as they were required to work for a master for a certain

period, often in return for travel expenses, shelter, and food (or sustenance).

A woman's property and wages belonged to her husband. Only widows and the very few women who never married could own property and run their own business; such women paid taxes, but could not vote. Once married, a woman could not sue or be sued, make contracts, buy or sell property, or write a will. Her husband had all legal rights to the children. Divorces were difficult to obtain; a common reaction to an unbearable husband was to run away to another man or back to Mother. Despite some difficulties, it seems that a fair share of marriages were happy ones. Letters between husbands and wives reveal much warmth and tenderness.⁵ Widows without property who did not remarry often faced poverty. They congregated in cities to support themselves as midwives, teachers, laundresses, seamstresses, or servants. A woman with property might open a shop, inn, or boardinghouse.

During the American Revolution, women of every rank boycotted British-made cloth and tea. During the war, women did men's jobs and provided support in varied capacities. When the War of Independence was won, slaves were gradually freed in the North and education became more available to girls, but major changes in the rights of women followed only after suffrage was achieved in 1920.

Jane Franklin Mecom (1712-1794)

The daughter of a chandler (maker and seller of tallow, wax candles, and soap) and favorite sister of Benjamin Franklin, Jane was the youngest of seventeen children. Married at fifteen to the local saddler, Jane had twelve children, eleven of whom died while she was still alive.

Jane became her brother's favorite correspondent. For a quarter of a century, she gave birth to a new baby every other year. At age thirty, Jane took in lodgers, helped in her husband's shop, and cared for children and aging parents. Her husband died in 1765, but none of Jane's surviving children was able to support their aging mother. Her brother Benjamin tried to help by sending trading goods from England, where he was a representative of the thirteen colonies. The boxes arrived just as Bostonians decided to boycott British goods, so Jane was not able to sell them.⁶

When Jane was seventy, her granddaughter died in childbirth, and she was again the head of a household and the caretaker of four small children. By 1784, however, she was living comfortably in Ben's home in Boston, where she had the leisure to read and write until her death in 1794.

Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784)

A thin, sickly eight-year-old Phillis was brought to Boston on a slave ship from Africa. A white woman, Susanna Wheatley, took pity and bought the girl. Mary, the Wheatley's daughter, taught Phillis to read and write. Within sixteen months, Phillis spoke English and read the Bible. At the age of twelve, she knew Latin and Greek, was translating works of the Roman poet Ovid, and was writing her own poetry. She also studied geography, astronomy, and ancient history. Susanna took pride in Phillis' intelligence and protected her delicate health, but did not grant her freedom.

At seventeen, Phillis published a poem about George Whitefield, the leader of the "Great Awakening," a religious revival that was sweeping through the colonies. Only a week before he died, Whitefield had preached in Boston, where Phillis must have heard him. Wheatley's beautiful eulogy—printed in newspapers in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and London—led to publication of a book of poetry and finally to her emancipation in 1773. With the deaths of Susanna, John, and Mary Wheatley, however, Phillis was on her own. She continued to write poetry

and supported American independence. One of her most famous poems was "To His Excellency George Washington."

Since Phillis could not support herself, she married a free black, but he deserted her and their young child. To survive, Phillis took a job as a domestic servant. She was still able to publish several poems; one of them ("Liberty and Peace") is considered by many to be her best. Before it was printed, Phillis, who had been sickly all of her life, became seriously ill from an infection following childbirth and died at the young age of thirty-one.

Deborah Sampson (1760-1827)

Deborah Sampson was born to poor farmers. With the death or possible desertion of her father, she became an indentured servant. At twenty-two, finished with her servitude and inspired by the Revolution, she dressed



in men's clothing and enlisted in the militia, but was soon discovered.

Not one to quit, she again enlisted under the assumed name of Robert Shurtleff and marched toward West Point, New York, with the Continental Army. She wrote to her mother that she had found agreeable employment in a "large but well-regulated family."⁷

Deborah was wounded at Tarrytown, New York. Determined to remain undetected, she extracted a musket ball from her thigh. She continued to serve, but contracted a fever and was taken to a hospital. The examining doctor was amazed to discover the soldier's gender, but told no one. Upon recovery, Deborah again served, became ill again, and was discharged.

Why did Deborah do such a risky thing? She might have viewed military service as a patriotic duty and an economic opportunity. She could receive a bonus and free land after the war. Also, she may have been drawn to the challenge and excitement of the war. She could not achieve any of these things, however, without pretending to be a man.

In 1784 Deborah married Benjamin Gannett. They bought a farm and had children, but her health was poor. After petitioning the General Court in Massachusetts, she eventually received back pay for her service as a soldier. In 1802, she donned a blue and white uniform, carried a musket, and went on a

speaking tour of New York and New England, telling about her adventures.

Mercy Otis Warren (1728-1814)

Mercy Warren has been aptly described as "the foremost female intellectual in eighteenth century America."⁸ At her birth she entered a world of wealth, social status, and political power. Bright, highly energetic, charming, and ambitious, Mercy made the most of all of her gifts. Her youth was spent pursuing the established routines of domesticity. Although she had no formal education, her brother took note of his sister's brilliance and contributed significantly to her education.

In 1754 she married James Warren, merchant and politician, and moved to Plymouth, Massachusetts. They had five children. James was an intelligent partner who supported her intellectual interests. Yet she also had the energy to raise children and attend to household duties.

Throughout the 1770s, Mercy followed closely the political events in Boston. Her correspondents included John Adams, Samuel Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Elbridge Gerry, and Henry Knox. These men asked "her opinion in political matters, and acknowledge[d] the excellence of her judgment."⁹ Her letters reveal a remarkable clarity, perceptivity, and boldness.

For years Mercy wrote poetry, but not until 1772 did she publish. Her first work was a dramatic piece intended as propaganda against Governor Thomas Hutchinson, whom she depicted as willing to destroy the colony. In other plays, she attacked British officials and Loyalists.

In her seventies, she published her finest work, a three-volume set, *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution*, which is considered by modern historians to be "the most complete account we have of the Revolution." Mercy remained strong and alert until her death at 87.



Eliza Lucas Pinckney (1722-1793)

The daughter of a career officer in the British army, Eliza was educated in England. When her father was ordered to the West Indies, Eliza managed his three plantations in South Carolina. She was just sixteen years old.

Eliza began a journal (which she called a “letterbook”) in which she recorded details of all aspects of daily life. For historians today, it represents “one of the most impressive documents of personal writings of an eighteenth century woman.”¹⁰ Eliza also sent informative letters to her father, brothers, and friends in England.

Commercial indigo (a blue dye made from the indigo plant) was in great demand, and in 1744, Eliza grew the first successful crop in the colonies and gave seeds to other planters. Within three years, South Carolina was exporting 100,000 pounds of indigo dye a year.

Eliza was a gifted musician, spoke several languages, taught her sister and slave children how to read, experimented with new plants, dealt with overseers, taught herself the law, and read so much of the classic works by Locke, Plutarch, and Virgil that an elderly lady in the neighborhood “prophesied that she would damage her brain.” She found most of her male contemporaries to be dull.

In 1744, Eliza married Charles Pinckney, a forty-five-year-old widower. She asked for God’s

help to be a good wife, mother, and mistress of servants. Eliza and Charles had three children: Charles Cotesworth, Harriot, and Thomas. When Eliza was thirty-five, her husband contracted malaria and died. This loss might have undone her, but she continued to manage the plantation and raise her children. During the Revolutionary War, one of their plantations burned to the ground, yet the family recovered and prospered.

Two of Eliza’s sons became leaders: Charles (junior) was a member of the Constitutional Convention and Thomas became governor of South Carolina. Because their work took them away from their homes, Eliza helped to manage their plantations as well as her own and looked after their wives and children. When Eliza died of cancer, George Washington served as one of her pallbearers.

Hannah Lee Corbin (1728-1782)

Constructed in 1738, Stratford Hall was the home of the prominent Lee family. It was the boyhood home of Declaration of Independence signers Richard Henry Lee and Francis Lightfoot Lee, and it was the birthplace of Robert E. Lee, who—in the next century—would be the commander in chief of the (Rebel) Confederate Army in the Civil War.

Hannah Lee was the daughter of the founder of Stratford Hall and sister to Richard and Francis. Her father was determined to give an excellent educa-

tion to all of his children, so Hannah, along with her brothers, studied history, law, literature, religion, and politics.

At twenty, she married her cousin, Gawin Corbin, and had one child. But Gawin died, and his will stated that if Hannah remarried or moved, she would forfeit the estate. Failing to appear in court for the settlement, she was fined, but refused to pay. Hannah continued to reveal her independent spirit. When the Great Awakening swept Virginia, she heard sermons of Baptist preachers and became a convert to a church that was illegal in that colony.

Shortly after Gawin’s death, she fell in love with Dr. Richard Hall. Since Gawin’s will prevented her from remarrying, she decided to live with Hall but remain unmarried. Hannah managed the plantation as a widow and had two children by Hall, which displeased some people. Baptists worshipped in their home, a practice that was dangerous at the time—Hannah could have been imprisoned or attacked by angry neighbors. When Richard died, Hannah continued to manage Gawin’s estate, but worried about paying off Hall’s heavy debts. She complained about the position of widows and single women and the fact that women were taxed, but could not vote. She was probably the first woman in Virginia to be vocal about women’s rights. In her final years, Hannah became obsessed with religion and feared for her soul in the afterlife.

Three Questions for Discussion with Middle School Students


- ▶ Life was difficult or challenging for women at the time of the American Revolution. Describe two challenges that women faced.
- ▶ Chose one specific woman and tell about one of her achievements or why you find her life story to be interesting or remarkable.
- ▶ Below are primary source materials from the lives of these six women. Select one of these sources (A through F) and describe how it relates to the woman and to aspects of life during the late 1700s. If

the author of the source is not the woman herself, identify the person.

A Challenge for High School Students

“The portraits of six colonial women chronicle the lives of exceptionally able and interesting women and reveal much about the female experience in the eighteenth century.”

- ▶ Assess the validity of this statement in a coherent essay of several paragraphs, integrating the background information, several of the portraits, and the primary sources which follow in this article. Avoid paraphrasing.

Identify any of the primary sources you mention at the end of a sentence (for example, “Doc. A.”).¹¹ 

Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 1994): 51.
2. The lesson “Revolutionary Women” was developed through a fellowship at the Monticello-Stratford Hall Summer Seminar for Teachers in 1999. To obtain information about the fellowship, send a query to shpedu@stratfordhall.org, visit www.stratfordhall.org, or call (804) 493-8572.
3. Jan Lewis, “Women and the American Revolution,” *OAH Magazine of History* (Summer 1994), 24.
4. Michael P. Johnson, “Smothered Slave Infants: Were Slave Mothers at Fault?” in Linda K. Kerber and Jane DeHart Mathews, eds., *Women’s America: Refocusing the Past* (New York:

Document A

“Whereas it appears to this Court that the said Deborah Gannet enlisted, under the name of Robert Shirtliff . . . and did actually perform the duty of a soldier . . . for which she has received no compensation . . . it further appears that the said [soldier] exhibited an extraordinary instance of female heroism by discharging the duties of a faithful, gallant soldier, and at the same time preserving the virtue and chastity of her sex unsuspected and unblemished, and was discharged from the service with a fair and honorable character . . . The Treasurer (is) directed to issue his note to the said Deborah for the sum of thirty-four pounds. . . . Approved John Hancock” (1792)

Document B

“The virtuous and noble resolution of America’s sons, in defiance of threatened desolation and misery from arbitrary despots, demands our highest regard. . . . And be it known unto Britain, even American daughters are politicians and patriots, and will aid the good work with their female efforts.” *Mercy Warren (1774)*

Document C

“I think there was hardly Ever so unfortunate a Famely. I am not willing to think it is all owing to misconduct. I have had some children that seemed to be doing well till they were taken off by Death. . . .” *Jane Franklin Mecom (late 1770s)*

Document D

“Your favor of the 26th of October did not reach my hands till the middle of December . . . I apologize for the delay. . . . I thank you most sincerely for your polite notice of me in the elegant lines you enclosed . . . If you should ever come to Cambridge, or near headquarters, I shall be happy to see a person so favored by the Muses, and to whom nature has been so liberal and beneficent in her dispensations.” *George Washington (1776)*

Document E

“Item, I leave all my Estate both real and personal to my dear wife during her widowhood and continuance in this Country, allowing my daughter . . . out of my Estate a Genteel Education and maintenance at the discretion of my Executors hereafter mentioned; . . . if my wife marries again or leaves this County then and in that case, my will and desire is that my said wife shall be deprived of the bequest already made her. . . .” *From the will of Gawin Corbin (1750s)*

Document F

“If you will not laugh too immoderately at mee I’ll Trust you with a Secrett. I have made two wills already! I know I have done no harm, for I con’d [learned] my lesson very perfectly, and know how to convey by will, Estates, Real and Personal But after all what can I do if a poor Creature lies a-dying, and their family takes it into their head that I can serve them.” *Eliza Pinckney (1740s)*

- Oxford University Press, 1982), 111.
- Edmund S. Morgan, “Colonial Women,” in John H. Cary and Julius Weinberg, eds., *The Social Fabric: American Life from 1607 to the Civil War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978), 68.
- Ann Firor Scott, “Self Portraits,” in L. K. Kerber and J. DeH. Mathews, eds., *Women’s America: Refocusing the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 68.
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- Elizabeth F. Ellet, *Women of the American Revolution* (Williamstown, Mass.: Corner Publisher, 1980), 77.
- John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes, eds., *American National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), s.v. “Elizabeth Lucas Pinckney,” by Elise Pinckney.
- This assignment is similar to the DBQ (Document-Based-Question) on the Advanced Placement U.S. History Exam. Another possible essay assignment could read, “There is not always a good historical record to show what life was like for a group of people in the past.

What, do you think, allowed historians to know about the women in this article? Using the information given in this assignment, explain what record or traces of a woman’s life might have survived over the years. Give some examples.

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