

# Women in the American Revolution

## On the homefront and on the battlefield



Molly Pitcher firing cannon at Battle of Monmouth by E. Percy Moran.

Library of Congress

Women played critical roles in the American Revolution and subsequent War for Independence. Historian Cokie Roberts considers these women our Founding Mothers.

Women like Abigail Adams, the wife of Massachusetts Congressional Delegate John Adams, influenced politics as did Mercy Otis Warren. It was Abigail Adams who famously and voluminously corresponded with her husband while he was in Philadelphia, reminding him that in the new form of government that was being established he should “*remember the ladies*” or they too, would foment a revolution of their own. Warren, just as politically astute as Adams, was a prolific writer, not only recording her thoughts about the confluence of events swirling around Boston but also dabbling in playwriting. She was a fierce devotee to the patriot cause, writing in December 1774, four months before the war broke out at Lexington and Concord, “*America stands armed with resolution and virtue, but she still recoils at the idea of drawing the sword against the nation from whence she derived her origin.*” In 1805 she published *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*.



Women often followed their husbands in the Continental Army. These women, known as camp followers, often tended to the domestic side of army organization, washing, cooking, mending clothes, and providing medical help when necessary. Sometimes they were flung into the vortex of battle. Such was the case of Mary Ludwig Hays, better known as Molly Pitcher, who earned fame at the Battle of Monmouth in 1778. Hays first brought soldiers water from a local well to quench their thirst on an extremely hot and humid day and then replaced her wounded husband at his artillery piece, firing at the oncoming British. In a similar vein, Margaret Corbin was severely wounded during the British assault on Fort Mifflin in November 1776 and left for dead alongside her husband, also an artilleryman, until she was attended by a physician. She lived, though her wounds left her permanently disabled. History recalls her as the first American female to receive a soldier's lifetime pension after the war.

Phillis Wheatley, an enslaved African American living in Boston, took up the pen and wrote poetry, becoming one of the first published female authors in America and the first African American woman to be published. Her 1773 collection *Poems on*

*Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was popular on both sides of the Atlantic. Her poems focused on patriotism and human virtues. She even wrote a poem about George Washington, "*To His Excellency, George Washington*" in 1775, which she personally read to him at his Cambridge headquarters in 1776 while he was with the Continental Army in Massachusetts besieging the British. Her visit was the result of an invitation from Washington. Wheatley obtained her freedom upon the death of her master in 1778.

New York teenager Sibyl Ludington, was the female equivalent of Paul Revere, though she rode twice as far as Revere and in a driving rainstorm in April, 1777. Her ride took her through Putnam and Dutchess Counties, New York where she roused local militia to fight a British force that had attacked nearby Danbury, Connecticut. The Daughters of the American Revolution erected a heroic equestrian statue to Ludington in Carmel, New York along the forty mile route she traveled.

The story of one of the most famous revolutionary women, Betsy Ross, is likely just that - a story. Ross is often credited with sewing the first American flag, thirteen red and white stripes with thirteen stars in a field of blue in the corner. Subsequent research, however, shows that the story only surfaced around the Centennial, 1876, and was promoted by Ross's grandson William Canby. Given that Congress passed the Flag Act in June of 1777, nearly a year after Ross is purported to have made the flag, the story is likely apocryphal.



"The Birth of Old Glory" depicts the supposed creation of the first American flag by Betsy Ross.

Wikimedia Commons

As wives of the common soldier often followed the Continental Army so, too, did the wives of general officers. General Henry Knox, the Continental Army's Artillery Commander married the vivacious and popular Bostonian Lucy Flucker, the daughter of Bostonian Loyalists. Once she and Henry were married, all ties between her and her family were cut. Henry and Lucy were devoted to one another and she would join him whenever she could while he was on campaign. She endured the bitter encampment at Valley Forge and became fast friends with the wife of General Nathanael Greene, the equally popular Kitty. George Washington's wife, Martha Custis, spent every winter with her husband wherever the army was camped. In fact, once George Washington left his beloved Mount Vernon estate in 1775 to attend the 2nd Continental Congress in Philadelphia, he did not return to his home until 1781, as the combined American and French Army maneuvered south from the city of New York to Yorktown, Virginia, where the war was eventually won. The wives of generals were as equally helpful in matters of caring and providing compassion to sick and wounded soldiers, as were the wives of the common soldiers.

Ordinary women also endured the horrors of the battlefield when those fights came to their doorstep. Sally Kellogg of Vermont and her family escaped the gods of War in 1776 when the War for Independence found its way into the northern reaches of upstate New York and Benedict Arnold's makeshift fleet and the British Navy clashed on Lake Champlain during the Battle of Valcour Island. As the Kellogg family made good its escape by water, Sally's family "*fell in between Arnold's fleet and the British fleet,*" she later recalled. As the family rowed to safety at Fort Ticonderoga, the exchange of gunfire between ships could be seen and heard Sally recalled, "*but happy for us the balls went over us. We heard them whis.*" Nevertheless the war continued to follow the Kellogg family. A year later, after having relocated to Bennington, Vermont the Kellogg's were once more forced to be witnesses to carnage and once again upon recollection Sally claimed the results were, "*a sight to behold*". There was not a house [in Bennington's vicinity] but was stowed full of wounded.

Not unlike women eighty years later who disguised themselves as men to serve in the armies of the Civil War, women of the Revolutionary Era also itched to get into the fight, do their part for the cause, and be engaged in a historical moment. One of the best examples of a woman who disguised herself as a man to fight in the Continental Army was Deborah Sampson from Uxbridge, Massachusetts. Amazingly, she also has a paper trail concerning her combat service in the army, where she fought under the alias of Robert Shurtliff, the name of her deceased brother, in the light infantry company of the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. She mustered into service in the spring of 1782 and saw action in Westchester County, New York just north of the City of New York where she was wounded in her thigh and forehead. Not wanting her identity to be revealed during medical care she permitted physicians to treat her head wound and then slipped out of the field hospital unnoticed, where she extracted one of the bullets from her thigh with a penknife and sewing needle. The other bullet was lodged too deep and her leg never fully healed. Her identity was finally revealed during the summer of 1783 when she contracted a fever while on duty in Philadelphia. The physician who treated her kept her secret and cared for her. After the Treaty of Paris she was given an honorable discharge from the army by Henry Knox. Like other veterans of the Continental Army she was continually petitioning the state and federal government for her service pension. She later married and had three children settling down in Sharon, Massachusetts. To help make ends meet she often gave public lectures about her wartime service. By the time she died in 1827, she was collecting minimal pensions for her service from Massachusetts and the federal government. In her memory a statue stands today outside the public library, in Sharon, honoring her Revolutionary War service and sacrifices.

Many women of all stripes and from all backgrounds recognized the value of the American cause and stepped up to serve the cause of the new nation as best they could.

**Source:** <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/women-american-revolution> (visited 21 September 2020 at 16:55)

# WIKIPEDIA – Women in the American Revolution

**Women in the American Revolution** played various roles depending on their social status (in which race was a factor) and their political views.

The American Revolutionary War took place after Great Britain put in place the seven Coercive, or Intolerable Acts, in the colonies. Americans responded by forming the Continental Congress and going to war with the British. The war would not have been able to progress as it did without the widespread ideological, as well as material, support of both male and female inhabitants of the colonies. While formal politics did not include women, ordinary domestic behaviors became charged with political significance as women confronted the Revolution. Halting previously everyday activities, such as drinking British tea or ordering clothes from Britain, demonstrated Colonial opposition during the years leading up to and during the war.

Although the war raised the question of whether or not a woman could be a patriot, women across separate colonies demonstrated that they could. Support was mainly expressed through traditional female occupations in the home, the domestic economy, and their husbands' and fathers' businesses. Women participated by boycotting British goods, producing goods for soldiers, spying on the British, and serving in the armed forces disguised as men.

The war also affected the lives of women who remained loyal to the crown, or was politically neutral; in many cases, the impact was devastating.

**Source:** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women\\_in\\_the\\_American\\_Revolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_the_American_Revolution) (visited 21 September 2020 at 17:00)

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# Revolutionary Changes and Limitations: Women



Playwright, essayist and poet, Judith Sargent Murray (1751-1820) is considered one of the first public champions of women's rights in the U.S.

The Revolutionary rethinking of the rules for society also led to some reconsideration of the relationship between men and women. At this time, women were widely considered to be inferior to men, a status that was especially clear in the lack of legal rights for married women. The law did not recognize wives' independence in economic, political, or civic matters in Anglo-American society of the eighteenth century.

Even future First Ladies had relatively little clout. After the death of her first husband, Dolley Todd Madison, had to fight her deceased spouse's heirs for control of his estate. And Abigail Adams, an early advocate of women's rights, could only encourage her husband John, to "*Remember the Ladies*" when drawing up a new federal government. She could not participate in the creation of this government, however.

The Revolution increased people's attention to political matters and made issues of liberty and equality especially important. As Eliza Wilkinson of South Carolina explained in 1783, "*I won't have it thought that because we are the weaker sex as to bodily strength we are capable of nothing more than domestic concerns. They won't even allow us liberty of thought, and that is all I want.*"



The Dolley Madison silver dollar was minted as a tribute to Madison's work in Washington, especially during the War of 1812.

Judith Sargent Murray wrote the most systematic expression of a feminist position in this period in 1779 (but not published until 1790). Her essay, "*On the Equality of the Sexes*," challenged the view that men had greater intellectual capacities than women. Instead she argued that whatever differences existed between the intelligence of men and women were the result of prejudice and discrimination that prevented women from sharing the full range of male privilege and experience. Murray championed the view that the "*Order of Nature*" demanded full equality between the sexes, but that male domination corrupted this principle.

Like many other of the most radical voices of the Revolutionary Era, Murray's support for gender equality was largely met by shock and disapproval. Revolutionary and Early National America remained a place of male privilege. Nevertheless, the understanding of the proper relationships among men, women, and the public world underwent significant change in this period. The republican thrust of revolutionary politics required intelligent and self-disciplined citizens to form the core of the new republic. This helped shape a new ideal for wives as "*republican mothers*" who could instruct their children, sons especially, to be intelligent and reasonable individuals. This heightened significance to a traditional aspect of wives' duties brought with it a new commitment to female education and helped make husbands and wives more equal within the family.



Susanna Haswell Rowson (1762-1824), in the preface to her novel *Charlotte Temple*, dedicates the book "*to the many daughters of Misfortune who, deprived of natural friends, or spoiled by a mistaken education, are thrown on an unfeeling world without the least power to defend themselves from the snares not only of the other sex, but from the more dangerous arts of the profligate of their own.*"

Although "*republican motherhood*" represented a move toward greater equality between husbands and wives, it was far less sweeping than the commitment to equality put forth by women like Judith Sargent Murray. In fact, the benefits that accompanied this new ideal of motherhood were largely restricted to elite families that had the resources to educate their daughters and to allow wives to not be employed outside the household. Republican motherhood did not meaningfully extend to white working women and was not expected to have any place for enslaved women.

Nevertheless, this new way of understanding elite women's relationship to the broader world began long-term changes whose later influence would be profound. For example, the 1790s saw the expansion of new kinds of books aimed for a female audience and often written by women. Susanna Haswell Rowson's tale of seduction *Charlotte Temple* (1791), for example, was a best-selling novel well into the 19th century. This new form of popular writing reflected and helped further expanded education and literacy for women. The female heroines of these novels frequently provided examples of the unjust suffering of women in a male-dominated world

**Source:** <https://www.ushistory.org/us/13e.asp> (visited 21 September 2020 at 17:11)

# Women and Politics in the Era of the American Revolution

Historians once assumed that, because women in the era of the American Revolution could not vote and showed very little interest in attaining the franchise, they were essentially apolitical beings. Scholars now recognize that women were actively engaged in the debates that accompanied the movement toward independence, and that after the war many sought a more expansive political role for themselves. Moreover, men welcomed women's support for the war effort. If they saw women as especially fit for domestic duties, many continued to seek women's political guidance and help even after the war ended.

Granted, those women who wanted a more active and unmediated relationship to the body politic faced severe legal and ideological obstacles. The common law system of coverture gave married women no control over their bodies or to property, and thus accorded them no formal venue to express their political opinions. Religious convention had it that women, the "*weaker sex*," were the authors of original sin. The ideology associated with "republicanism" argued that the attributes of independence, self-reliance, physical strength, and bravery were exclusively masculine virtues. Many observers characterized women as essentially selfish and frivolous creatures who hungered after luxuries and could not contain their carnal appetites. Nevertheless, some women carved out political roles for themselves.

In the lead up to the war, many women played active, even essential roles in various non-consumption movements, promising to refrain from purchasing English goods, and attacking those merchants who refused to boycott prohibited goods. Some took to the streets, participating in riots that periodically disturbed the tranquility of colonial cities. A few published plays and poems proclaiming their patriotic views. Those women, who would become loyalists, were also active, never reluctant, to express their disapproval of the protest movement.

During the war, many women demonstrated their loyalty to the patriot cause by shouldering the burdens of absent husbands. They managed farms and businesses. First in Philadelphia, and then in other cities, women went from door to door collecting money for the Continental Army. Some accompanied husbands to the battlefield, where they tended to the material needs of soldiers. A very few disguised themselves as men and joined the army, exposing as a lie the notion that only men had the capacity to sacrifice their lives for the good of the country. Loyalist women continued to express their political views, even though doing so brought them little more than physical suffering and emotional pain. African American women took advantage of wartime chaos to run away from their masters and forge new, independent lives for themselves.

After the war, women marched in parades, lobbied and petitioned legislators, attended sessions of Congress, and participated in political rallies—lending their support to particular candidates or factions. Elite women published novels, poems, and plays. Some hosted salons where men and women gathered to discuss political issues. In New Jersey, single property-owning women voted.

By the end of the century, however, proponents of women's political rights lost ground, in part because new "*scientific*" notions of gender difference prepared the way for the concept of "*separate spheres*." Politics became more organized, leaving little room for women to express their views "*out of doors*," even as judges and legislators defined women as naturally dependent. Still, white, middle class women in particular took advantage of better educational opportunities, finding ways to influence the public sphere without demanding formal political rights. They read, wrote, and organized benevolent societies, laying the groundwork for the antebellum reform movements of the mid-19th century.

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