Did the American Revolution change the role of women in American society?

**Viewpoint: Yes.** The Revolution broke down traditional barriers and changed perceptions of the proper female role in society as women increasingly declared their interest in public affairs.

**Viewpoint: No.** The Revolution produced no significant benefits for women because their limited prewar experiences did not prepare them to take advantage of opportunities to elevate their position in society.

The War of Independence was arguably America's first "total war." All elements of society mobilized for war, including women, who contributed to the war effort in many ways. Some women raised money for the war effort, made shirts and uniforms for soldiers, and collected scrap metal for making bullets. Still others made homespun clothes and other material substitutes for British imported goods that proved invaluable in the success of the American nonconsumption agreements. Many women also served as "deputy husbands" by managing farms, plantations, and stores while their husbands served on military duty. Finally, women provided valuable service to the army as "camp followers" by washing, sewing, cooking, and nursing (in other words, activities that were considered women's work) that male soldiers were reluctant to do.

In all these activities, however, women did not stray far from their traditional domestic sphere and therefore did not threaten the established patriarchy. Indeed, few women insisted on a redefinition of their role and status, perhaps because they knew that most men still thought of females as a form of property whose sole existence was to serve them and therefore would strongly resist any attempt by the "weaker sex" to upset this vassal-lord relationship. Still, what is significant about women's contributions to the Revolution is that Patriot leaders saw women as invaluable allies in the struggle against Britain and openly solicited their support. Women's contributions also illustrate the depth of commitment to the American cause.

Thus, women played an important and conspicuous role in the American Revolution. What is in question, however, is whether or not the Revolution helped to liberate women from their traditionally subservient status. The following essays present two opposing answers to this question. An examination of this issue forces careful consideration of gender relations and women's roles in American society, as well as the purpose of the war and the "revolutionary" aspect of this epochal event.
Viewpoint:
Yes. The Revolution broke down traditional barriers and changed perceptions of the proper female role in society as women increasingly declared their interest in public affairs.

Until recently, historians of the colonial period generally accepted the notion that white American women enjoyed a social status higher than their European counterparts and their nineteenth-century sisters. Scholars based their findings on women’s vital contribution to household management and the family economy. While the vast majority of eighteenth-century women worked within the home, many also engaged in business activities where they encountered few legal or social restraints. Moreover, the high ratio of men to women in the colonies presumably allowed females a stronger bargaining position in marital relationships. Since gender roles were not sharply defined and distinctions between men and women were relatively negligible, preindustrial women enjoyed a larger measure of independence and equality.

With the onset of industrialization in the early nineteenth century, however, rigid separate spheres for the sexes emerged, and the “golden age” of female opportunity ceased. As men necessarily left the farms for the factories, where they increasingly participated in business and public affairs, women’s roles as economic producers and political participants declined. The female sphere was removed to a domestic setting. Thus, scholars concluded, the market revolution, and not the American Revolution, brought about a new separation of the sexes, disrupting old social relations and contributing to a deterioration of female autonomy.

The representation of the colonial era as a “golden age” for women, however, was a myth. Eighteenth-century America was not an egalitarian society but a hierarchical and patriarchal order that assigned a subordinate, domestic role to women. In fact, socially constructed roles for the sexes were often deemed an inviolate, natural law. “The empire of women,” Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote in 1763, is one “of softness, of address, of complacency.” Women who transgressed into civic life upset the essential balance between the male and female spheres. Consequently, though colonial wives might supervise the day-to-day activities of the home and farm, they exercised little or no control over the wealth they produced. Husbands controlled the finances, their wives’ legal status (féme covert, or covered woman), and the ultimate decisions concerning children. Political debate and voting rights remained male prerogatives, while women bore children, bestowed love, and dispensed moral guidance. In cases of unhappy marriages, women had few legal options to divorce. Furthermore, most colonial women could not sue, draft wills, write contracts, serve on juries, or buy and sell property. Unmarried women or widows who held real estate were politically powerless and lacked a public voice to oppose taxation without representation. As for schooling, few girls attended or had access to formal education, which, in turn, narrowed the range of occupations open to women. In short, domestic experiences, rather than the public sphere, defined the lives of colonial American women.

Decades before the introduction of factories and machines, the revolutionary period began to alter the female condition. The war raised their consciousness and broke down traditional gender barriers. The outpouring of pamphlets, newspapers, and sermons unleashed “a contagion of liberty” that stirred female inquisitiveness beyond the boundaries of their private realm. The letters and diaries of a few educated women revealed their curiosity about political topics, considered “the most animating Subject” of the day. Whereas earlier they apologized for their interest in public affairs, after the mid 1760s women eagerly read political literature, regularly engaged in policy debates, and openly proclaimed their allegiance as either Patriots or Loyalists. This newfound sense of political awareness and self-identity led New Jersey poet and writer Annis Boudinot Stockton boldly to declare: “Tho a female I was born a patriot and cant help it If I would.”

Other more traditional-minded, articulate women, however, expressed their political opinions in private. In the spring of 1776 Abigail Adams, who corresponded frequently with her husband, John, adopted the revolutionary rhetoric by expressing her desire for a “new Code of Laws” that would “Remember the Ladies.” The Revolution, she reasoned, had challenged customary modes of thought and behavior that could no longer be ignored. “If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies,” she asserted, “we are determined to foment a Rebellion.” Clearly, the imperial crisis and impending war politicized women, raising their expectations and heightening their demands, even if only in a private setting.

Although the Revolution did not liberate women from male dominance or result in a rebellion, as Abigail Adams threatened, it called customary roles into question. The profound effect of revolutionary ideology resonated with women, who seized upon any opportunity to take an active role in the conflict. When newspaper ed-
tors urged them to support a boycott of tea and other taxed items, colonial women responded to their patriotic call to action. Groups of ladies signed public pledges to abstain from using tea. Others refused to buy English goods and organized mass spinning bees to weave homespun cloth. Some even "threw off their delicacy" and joined the tar-and-feathering crowds. In the South the ladies of Edenton, North Carolina, formally agreed to endorse nonimportation policies and do everything within their power to support the "publick good." Such activities represented a radical departure from their limited roles as guardians of the hearth and home and signaled an expanded sense of self-identify as political actors.

As women gained a political voice, their supporting roles on the farm and the battlefront also expanded. The disruptions of the normal patterns of life, as well as the potential for danger, death, and destruction, had a noticeable effect on women. With their sons and husbands away at war, wives adeptly assumed a wider range of tasks traditionally allocated to men. Alone for long periods of time, women operated farms, provided for families, managed finances, and ran businesses. In turn, these new responsibilities provided them with a sense of confidence in themselves and in their abilities to handle unfamiliar duties. At the same time, wives of the combatants volunteered to perform essential wartime tasks as camp followers. They found work as cooks, laundresses, and nurses, while a few served as spies, couriers, and soldiers. While many surely followed their spouses into war because of marital ties or a lack of alternative means of support, some women acted indepen-
ently and with political conviction. One such activist was Deborah Sampson, who disguised herself as a man to enlist in the Continental Army. Others, such as patriot Esther Reed, articulated a firm resolution to contribute personally as much as possible to the cause. In her 1780 broadside, The Sentiments of an American Woman, she outlined an active role for women. Since opinion and manners prohibited women from marching "to glory by the same paths as the Men," Reed observed, they should therefore renounce their "vain ornaments" and donate those surplus funds for the benefit of the troops. As a consequence, in Philadelphia alone "the offering of the Ladies" totaled more than $300,000, prompting General George Washington to offer his profuse thanks. Wartime disruptions, then, dissolved many distinctions between private and public spheres and signaled far wider roles for women than caretakers of domestic households or partners in marital unions.

In the aftermath of the Revolution, as women pushed the limits that had governed their colonial grandmothers, leaders of the new Republic undertook a redefinition of female roles. The issue aroused considerable public debate, especially among newspaper and magazine editors. Since women had competently and patriotically aided the war effort, they reported, old notions about rigid separate spheres had to be discarded. Men no longer could accept unquestioningly the belief in feminine weakness, delicacy, and dependence; however, by discarding such traditional characterizations of female nature, a new relationship between the state and women's public role was necessary.

Yet, few citizens were willing to declare that men and women were equal. Notwithstanding the brief experiment in New Jersey (1776–1807) with female suffrage, the nation chose to accommodate its female Patriots by defining their public role along with their domestic responsibilities. Utilizing the ideology of republican motherhood, Patriot leaders forged a compromise between women's exclusion from the body politic and their integration into full citizenship. Since the success of the Republic rested on the character of its citizens, they reasoned, female filial duties were to nurture, exert moral influence, and raise virtuous sons. Thus, by recognizing the value of women's work, society endowed domesticity with political meaning.

As a consequence of the American Revolution, republican ideology emphasized the importance of female education. Prior to the war, few girls had received formal instruction beyond the rudiments of essential basic skills. After all, daughters were educated for marriage and dependence, not for an occupation or independence. "All the accomplishments we teach them are directed, not to their future benefit in life," writer Thomas Cooper argued, "but to the amusement of the male sex." But unexpected wartime demands, which confronted many competent, yet unprepared, women for the first time, convinced them of their need for broader training. Moreover, with their newly expanded role as republican mothers, theoretically accountable to the nation, women necessarily would require wider access to education. Public elementary schools opened their doors to females, and private academies greatly expanded the curriculum offered to girls. At the same time, teaching became the first profession open to women, attracting many intellectually gifted young students. Access to education, then, was a significant benefit to women resulting from the Revolution.

The postwar period also accelerated changes in family and marital relationships for women. Although they remained femes covertis, women achieved some limited social and legal gains. Daughters no longer assumed that marriage was their only destiny. They could choose to postpone or even forgo matrimony. Increasingly, republican parents allowed those who married to choose their own partners. "In matters of such importance," a New Englander observed in 1784, a young woman "ought to be left entirely to herself." Republican thinking also shifted perspectives on family authority from a patriarchal to a more egalitarian relationship. Rather than obedience and subordination, women were freer to express their needs and opinions and to insist on a marriage of mutual esteem and shared affection. Furthermore, several states began to revise their laws, giving widows more control over their inherited estates. Other states responded to revolutionary principles that emphasized freedom from burdensome masters by passing statutes that legalized divorce and provided for joint custody of minor children. With the elimination of primogeniture after the war, for the first time females were the legal equal of males in issues of inheritance.

The egalitarian spirit of the age also altered child-rearing practices in the Republic. Departing from the patriarchal family model, some fathers no longer ruled tyrannically over their offspring but adopted more enlightened rational techniques that nurtured rather than punished and guided rather than directed. At the same time, the role of motherhood assumed greater importance. As women molded the next generation of citizens, they became caregivers and teachers, instructing by both example and precept. Thus, the future of the nation ultimately depended on the successful transmission of moral and democratic values by republican mothers.
As a result of the American Revolution, women's lives changed forever. The postrevolutionary decades broke down traditional barriers for women and expanded their consciousness concerning their proper role in society. Furthermore, their wartime experiences emboldened women to assume important responsibilities in the absence of men, participate in business affairs, and feed and clothe an army. They performed valuable services in the public arena, from speech making and boycotting to petitioning and nursing. In the process, Revolutionary women became politicized and, like men, made claims on the Republic. While the gender gap remained broad, women acquired greater autonomy over their homes, property, and lives. Additionally, they gained access to education that would eventually lead to the full assertion of their political, legal, and social rights by the 1840s. Indeed, by 1798, writer Judith Sargent Murray could predict gloweringly that the Revolution had dispelled "the clouds which have hitherto enveloped" women, and "a new era of female history" had commenced.

-MARY L. KELLEY, LAMAR UNIVERSITY

Viewpoint:
No. The Revolution produced no significant benefits for women because their limited prewar experiences did not prepare them to take advantage of opportunities to elevate their position in society.

In eighteenth-century America, women—along with slaves, servants, and children—were presumed to be dependents. Although female dependence took many forms and varied according to class, race, and region, it was rooted principally in women's primary roles as wives and mothers. Marriage, the institution that shaped these roles, was guided by many long-standing social, economic, and legal traditions—all of which set the stage for female dependence. Although an increasing number of middle-class parents were allowing their children to choose their marriage partners, many eighteenth-century marriages were still arranged. Marriage thus continued to represent a linkage of land and family resources rather than of individuals; it was a partnership meant to preserve and enhance a family's lineage and legacy. These traditions, especially as they were expressed in law, significantly impacted men's and women's roles in marriage and society. According to the precedents of English Common Law, a man who married found himself elevated to the status of patriarch; he became his family's public face. A woman who married, by contrast, found herself subordinated as a feme covert (covered woman). Indeed, under the laws of coverture, a married woman had no legal or political identity separate from that of her husband; she was literally and metaphorically covered by him and his identity. This status meant that, with some exceptions, a married woman could not own property, make contracts, or sue or be sued apart from her husband—nor could she vote, serve on a jury, or hold political office. Coverture also restricted a wife's claim to family property. Typically, a married woman could claim absolute control of only a small amount of personal property, such as clothing, jewelry, and kitchen utensils. If widowed, a wife had dower rights to only a one-third, life-interest share of her husband's real estate—unless her husband specified otherwise. This provision usually provided a widow with a place to reside but gave her almost no authority over its management and disposal. The American Revolution did nothing to change the subordinate status of women.

Coverture defined a woman's dependent position in marriage. Yet, it also had broader implications, because in establishing a hierarchy of male over female in the household, coverture served as a key building block of the monarchical society that prevailed in England and America before the American Revolution. To the English, as to the American colonists, the gendered hierarchy in the "little commonwealth" of the household mirrored and nurtured the gendered hierarchy of the larger commonwealth. England envisioned its nation as one large household of subjects led by a benevolent but patriarchal king; and just as in the "little" household where husbands had obligations to serve and protect their families and wives were expected to submit, subjects of the king were linked by their reciprocal duties and obligations to one another. In establishing a ranked order in society, these duties and obligations fostered political stability in the realm—a stability that, for the most part, held until the American Revolution. At the same time, these duties and obligations also worked to hold women in a subordinate place within the state and conditioned society in England and America to view women as dependents whose obligations were to submit rather than to lead or resist. Women, it was assumed, needed protection; they would not, should not, or could not be revolutionaries.

Eighteenth-century American women also faced other constraints. As mothers, women found that female "lifeways" of childbearing and childrearing held them close to hearth and home. American women, white as well as black,
first married, on average, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. At that time they embarked on a lifelong pattern of childbearing and child rearing. Many women bore children, on average, about once every twenty-four to thirty-six months until they reached their forties. Although these averages varied by race, class, and region, most women spent upward of twenty years of their adult lives pregnant, nursing, or caring for small children. Indeed, despite high rates of infant mortality, it was not unusual for an eighteenth-century woman to raise eight or more children to adulthood. And because eighteenth-century society extolled women’s fertility as one of their chief virtues, children—the “fruits” of a woman’s body—were one of the principal measures of her social worth.

Fertility patterns and the burden of rearing so many children constrained women’s lives and limited their experiences and ability to participate in nondomestic affairs. Marriage and motherhood thus shaped the daily lives of eighteenth-century American women in ways both subtle and profound. There can be no doubt that these life experiences offered women many personal rewards and emotional joys. At the same time, however, the legalities of marriage and the logistical issues of childbearing and child raising limited women’s life experiences and curtailed their contact with places beyond their households.
This responsibility did not mean that eighteenth-century women were entirely isolated or helpless. Households were, after all, not only the building blocks of the state and society but also the backbone of the economy. In the preindustrial age, households served as the principal centers for all production and consumption. The economic role of the household had important implications for women's lives. Indeed, the survival of any given household was dependent on the contributions of women, who not only performed typical "female" chores such as cooking, washing, and gardening, but during their husband's absence served as "deputy husbands" by managing family farms and shops. Women also expanded household income by producing and selling cloth, butter, and cheese. For women, the centrality of the household economy meant that their contributions were essential to family survival.

Despite their many real and valuable contributions to the household economy, the nature of women's economic roles limited their ability to engage in nondomestic pursuits. Their jobs, though diverse, most often took place inside or closer to the home to accommodate their duties as wives and mothers. Indeed, even when single women or widows operated their own businesses, they were still linked to the domestic realm and the work often took place inside their homes. Most important, because married women could not make economic decisions independent of their husbands nor make any legal claim to the income earned from their labors, they were not regarded as independent economic actors. Thus, despite their real contributions to the household economy, married women remained economic dependents, subject to the will and authority of their husbands.

Because women's identities were so shaped by their connections to their husbands and their children, and because of the constraining female lifeways imposed on them, women were far less prepared than men to embrace American independence. Independence, after all, was a condition unfamiliar to them. Additionally, the political-legal restrictions on women's lives; the time and physical demands of their reproductive activities; and their important, but limited, economic role in the household economy created an atmosphere where few Americans, either female or male, could envision an expanded role for women resulting from the War of Independence. In fact, just the opposite prevailed. In a war-torn society where nearly everything remained uncertain, the household remained one of the most important sources of stability and continuity. Thus, a woman's domestic responsibilities not only increased but also became more important than ever. According to a 1947 article by Elizabeth Cometti in the *New England Quarterly*, this role meant that women "generally remained at home ministering to the needs of their household, assuming absent husbands' responsibilities, meeting as best they could the inevitable wartime scarcities, taking over jobs compatible with their physical limitations and conventions, and longing always for the return of their men and for peace." At its most basic level, then, women's role during the war was not only supportive in nature, it had an inherently conservative—or at least nonradical—quality; they continued to be the guardians of the households and family legacies that Americans continued to hold sacred.

The story of Mary Silliman is instructive in explaining how experience shaped women's attitudes toward the Revolution. Silliman, the educated daughter of a Puritan minister, found that the war brought her hardship as well as new responsibilities. During her husband's military service and imprisonment, the forty-one-year-old Silliman, then pregnant, was left alone to oversee their children, servants, and farm—all the while uncertain about her husband's safety. Although managing the farm gave her a newfound sense of pride, worry and fear were her predominant emotions. Silliman, like so many other women during the war, felt alone without her husband's companionship. She also felt helpless in confronting the new challenges she faced. For Silliman, her husband's return brought joy and a sense of relief. Thereafter, she willingly returned to her traditional duties of being a wife and mother; she did not regret the loss of her authority. In the end, Silliman's experiences during the war did not lead her to question the roles assigned her as a woman; rather, she took comfort in returning to the familiar. Her experiences and attitudes thus symbolize the many ways women's lives embodied continuities with the past rather than changes toward a new future.

Of course, women's lives were shaped not only by their own attitudes and experiences but also by those of their society. American society, though embracing many political and social changes in the aftermath of the Revolution, remained uncertain about its future. For that reason, the household remained a particularly important source of stability and order, much as it had before and during the war. It also continued to serve as the foundation of the social hierarchy, which while no longer overseen by the patriarchal figure of the English monarch, nonetheless remained both ranked and gendered. In the new American republic, men continued to hold the primary reins of power and authority, while women remained mostly submissive in attitude and contributory in action. There was, in short, no real social revolution in America.
Coverture, for example, remained intact until the 1820s when states began gradually to loosen property restrictions on married women's property. Childbearing, too, remained central to adult women's lives. Although some white, middle-class, urban women had fewer children, most women continued to bear children following traditional fertility patterns. Most aspects of women's lives thus remained unchanged following the Revolution. When their lives did change, these new conditions further cemented women's association with the domestic sides of life rather than expanding their roles beyond the household. Motherhood, and the duties associated with it, took on increased importance after the war with the concept of "republican motherhood." In a new republican nation where citizens, not monarchs, would be responsible for government, child rearing became crucial to the country's survival. As "republican mothers," American women were charged with raising responsible and virtuous sons who would be ready to bear the duties and obligations of citizenship upon reaching adulthood. For the first time in American history, mothering became a vocation. This responsibility intensified women's role as mothers and thereby created situations where many of them were more confined to their homes than ever before.

Despite the many political, social, and economic changes ushered in by the American Revolution, in the end, the daily lives and experiences of most American women remained remarkably the same after the war. Then, as before, women were principally wives and mothers. The dependent nature of these roles remained in stark contrast to the independence enjoyed by their husbands.

—JUDITH RIDNER,
MUHLENBERG COLLEGE

References


