

Impact of the american revolution on women

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



The American Revolution could be argued to be a time of freedom, where America was finally able to establish their independence. However, that independence was selective because women were not able to achieve the same freedoms. In fact, the status of women was arguably stagnated as they still suffered the patriarchal demands of society. This essay will argue the American Revolution did not fully free women because patriarchal customs still persisted during the war, meaning any benefits women did claim were unsubstantial and not all of them experienced those opportunities.

In the Revolution, patriarchal customs still persisted even though one could argue that it was supposed to be a time of change; according to *Women and the American Revolution*, Jan Lewis wrote how in Colonial America, women were considered to be inferior to men and had to surrender to their fathers and husbands (1994, 23). Furthermore, in marriage, women had to give up any property that they owned to their husbands, demonstrating that the Revolution was still a discriminating time for women because it is implied that men did not have to lose anything through matrimony (Lewis 1994, 23). The place for women was considered to be the household as a wife and mother, which possibly implies that they were not supposed to fight like the men were in the Revolution (Smith; Bloch, cited in Lewis 1994, 23-24). These man-made titles seemed to continue on during the Revolution because according to *Women and the American Revolution in Georgia*, Ben Marsh claimed that feminine fragility was something that still persisted (Marsh 2004, 160; Lewis 1994, 24-25). This can be seen in how the role of wife and mother influenced the Revolution; they were able to make men enlist and fight on either side; this illustrates that women were able to become

influencers; it was still a role that was dominated by the male (Lewis 1994, 23-25; Marsh 2004, 160). Patriarchal demands of women cost them their freedom because this idea of virtuosity and fragility furthered this idea of the supporter and not the influencer (Lewis 1994, 24-25, Marsh 2004, 160).

Women were educated to use their feminine influence on men, and while one may argue that to be power, one must wonder why it had to be just their femininity and not their strength and courage (Lewis 1994, 24-25).

Religion dictated that women were sinful and weaker than men, proving that it was used to advance these ideas of the superior male (Lewis 1994, 23-25). Even though Lewis claimed that Protestantism favored womanhood more in the eighteenth century, it only preferred certain qualities like righteousness, and maintained this philosophy that women had to serve, or influence, for human nature to perfect itself (1994, 23-25). Religion would continue to pursue the idea of male authority after the Revolution, because according to *Beyond the Great Debates: Gender and Race in Early America*, New England Baptism became a religious constitution that portrayed this dominant masculinity concept, proving that religion was still patriarchal and limiting towards women (Juster, cited in Brown 1998, 112). Furthermore, women who did not conform to Puritanism or were dictated to be witches were persecuted; therefore, many women were limited by religion (Brown 1998, 101-102).

In fact, the writings of these times demonstrate the legacy of the Revolution in how women's efforts of the time were put down as nothing but frivolous: Cynthia Kierner wrote that women in the South were the part of the cause of

wartime violence, even though most times were in self-defense, proving that only if women were to fight, they would lose their so-called virtue (cited in Marsh 2004, 171; Lewis 1994, 25). According to *Women Writing War: Mercy Otis Warren and Hannah Mather Crocker on the American Revolution*, women became historians as they became storytellers of the Revolution through literacy, which should have allowed women to emancipate themselves through their stories (Zagarri, cited in Botting 2016, 108). However, one could argue that their literary freedom was overshadowed by the writings of male writers like William Gordon and David Ramsay, "who portrayed women as mere victims, hostages, and passive bystanders of the Revolution", demonstrating that even in writing, women were still being suppressed because they were only reduced to certain titles (cited in Botting 2016, 91; Lewis 1994, 23-25).

In terms of love and marriage, the American Revolution arguably restricted women from finding potential partners; this is because it divided people to the point that engagements were broken and was implied that they could only marry those with the same political beliefs (Marsh 2004, 164). Considering parents had considerable influence over their children's marriageable partners, one could argue that women were even more restricted instead of freed because of the Revolution because their choice of who to love was further isolated (Lewis 1994, 23-24, Marsh 2004, 164). Even their contributions towards marriage was pretty much ignored because of the duties that fell onto abandoned wives and widows were undocumented, demonstrating the consequences of patriarchy by ignoring women (Candler, cited in Marsh 2004, 169). Furthermore, this had an effect on how women

who challenged the idea of being a good wife were marginalized from the benefits it entailed (Brown 1998, 102).

Emancipation for women was also divided by class and race because some were left back where they started: for example, elite women were forced to go with their husbands and leave their homes, while those of lower-classes had to remain back and face whatever happened, demonstrating that no matter what, women were forced into a position where they were actually trapped by the Revolution (Hall; Coleman; Hawes; cited in Marsh 2004, 163, 165-166). Furthermore, since the elite women were forced to follow their husbands, they were unable to exert dominance over the home, proving that the feminine fragility theory persisted because they were unable to prove to men that they were able to take care of themselves; instead one could argue that they had to follow in order to be protected by them (Hall; Coleman; Hawes, cited in Marsh 2004, 160, 163, 165-166).

Minority women also gained less freedoms than white women; one example was how black slaves who were mothers were further suppressed by the Revolution because running away from their owners meant that their children's welfare were at risk for the fact that they could not explain their absence as well as their own (Frey, cited in Marsh 2004, 161-162). On the other hand, the wives of wealthy planters ended up with more control over slaves because the effects of the Revolution allowed them to have sole dominance over them; this proves that while some women were able to flourish from the war, black women had little to no choice but to remain in their situation, proving that race and gender intersected in the Revolution

and were determinants on who obtained more freedom (Frey; Jackson, cited in Marsh 2004, 161-162).

This continued after the war as well as according to *Sisterhood of Blood: The Will to Descend and the Formation of the Daughters of the American Revolution*, the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) was formed in 1890 in order to celebrate the Revolution, and members were determined by their genealogical link to an ancestor who fought in the war (Gibbs; Walworth; Walworth Memorial Museum and Archives; Sweeney; Banner; Wallenstein; Bashford and Levine, cited in Strange 2014, 105-107). While one may argue that this connects women together by bonding through patriotism and being a female-dominated group, it excluded women of colour or certain religions, proving that many women were still having their self-rule being taken away from them by using their genetics and familial history against them (Gibbs; Walworth; Walworth Memorial Museum and Archives; Sweeney; Banner; Wallenstein; Bashford and Levine; Teachout, cited in Strange 2014, 105-107, 115). Revolutionary patriarchy was important as seen in *Defenders of Patriotism or Mothers of Fascism? The Daughters of the American Revolution, Antiradicalism, and Un-Americanism in the Interwar Period*, where patriarchy was celebrated and women "...were dependent on and happily submitted to their spouses without question, were sexually pure and pious, and focused on benevolently serving others", warning that feminism was dangerous to the American family (Erickson; Morgan; Kerber and Sherron De Hart; Nash; Norton; Wendt; cited in Wendt 2013, 951, 953). It demonstrates a dark truth about the Revolution: that not all women were not freed after the Revolution because they continued to discriminate

against each other afterwards and even tried to force these Revolutionary patriarchal ideals onto others (Gibbs; Walworth; Walworth Memorial Museum and Archives; Sweeney; Banner; Wallenstein; Bashford and Levine; Teachout, cited in Strange 2014, 105-107, 115; Erickson; Morgan; Kerber and Sherron De Hart; Nash; Norton; Wendt; cited in Wendt 2013, 951, 953).

The opportunities that were gained during and after the war were also limited to certain women as well which proves that not all achieved the same level of freedom: one example was how the Revolution allowed for unmarried women in New Jersey to vote (Klinghoffer and Elkis; Kerber; Norton, cited in Lewis 1994, 25). While this is an amazing improvement for women in the political sphere, considering it was only for unmarried women it shows how the freedoms that females got were only selective (Klinghoffer and Elkis; Kerber; Norton, cited in Lewis 1994, 25). In fact, in *Independence, Citizenship, and the American Revolution*, associating women with dependency was a way to exclude women from voting, since Thomas Jefferson assumed that adult women would be married (White; Adams to Sullivan; Smith & Gawalt; Ulrich; Ryan; Hoff-Wilson, cited in Gundersen 1987, 64-65). Another opportunity limited was property ownership, because while prenuptial agreements allowed women to obtain property through marriage, records show that many had the husbands as trustees, proving that the pre-Revolutionary ideal of women losing their properties in marriage still existed, that they were made to look weak and that only single women benefited more from the Revolution (Salmon, cited in Gundersen 1987, 72-73; Marsh 2004, 160).

Finally, women's political freedoms were restricted after the war because while they could use their newfound influence outside the government, it was determined that they could not act within it (Lewis 1994, 25). This was seen in 1778 Georgia, where their political status was left ambiguous when the Patriot government required "all white male inhabitants aged sixteen and above to take an oath of abjuration, declaring loyalty to the state", which arguably ignored the political actions of women; (Campbell; Hall; Lambert cited in Marsh 2004, 172; Lewis 1994, 25). Furthermore, it seems that according to several authors, women later lost these newfound roles; so while women's lives may have improved for a while, their roles eventually regressed (Lewis 1994, 25; Campbell; Hall; Lambert cited in Marsh 2004, 172; Beard; Dexter; Spruill; Thompson; Morris, cited in Brown 1998, 101).

In conclusion, women were not exactly enfranchised due the American Revolution. However, it does show that women were forced into male-influenced roles, women did actually take freedom from each other and that only certain women gained autonomy after the war. This essay does not serve to belittle the achievements that women gained from the Revolution, however it sets to point out that freedom was limited in different shapes and forms, and therefore, one must question whether feminism in the war fully flourished.

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