

Colonial american women



Colonial Women of the 17th, 18th, and 19th Centuries A society can deny a group their civil liberties, but it can not limit the influence that the group has on the political and social structure. Colonial women, prevented from owning property and denied the right to vote, have often been viewed as background features on the landscape of history. Yet, they were instrumental in the formation of laws and shaping our current form of government. They were often from different backgrounds, different centuries, had different motives, and worked in different ways. Anne Hutchinson, Abigail Adams, and Margaret Bayard Smith exerted pressures that influenced the future of society and the structure of our government.

Hutchinson and Adams were both daughters of clergymen that risked their well being to speak out against male tyranny. However, while Hutchinson used religion to change society Adams used a more indirect approach. Hutchinson was born into the 17th century Puritan society where women were not allowed to be clergymen or magistrates. Her open defiance against female preachers opened the doors to religious tolerance and paved the way for women's rights. John Winthrop described her religious meetings as a, "thing not tolerable nor comely in the sight of God, nor fitting for your sex" (qtd. in Gomes). Hutchinson's quest for equality had raised the anger of her community and alienated her from her clergy based family.

Adams, the wife of the second president John Adams, was able to influence her husband while he was a member of the Continental Congress. In a letter dated March 31, 1776 she writes, " If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation". Her words indicate the level of the growing discontent. Though her vision of

equality would not be immediately realized, the constitution would contain the provisions for its future. Though Hutchinson was banished and Adams's efforts were met with disappointment, both women shaped society in their own unique way.

Margaret Baryard Smith, an early 19th century writer and Federalist advocate, used her elite social status to influence business and political leaders. According to Varon, " At a time when Congress and the Cabinet were under siege from legions of potential office seekers, ...[Smith]... could and did exert considerable influence over how offices got distributed". Her political activities and influences helped maintain the waning attitude of 'government by the elite'. However, the Jacksonian era of populist politics would also embrace Smith's form of feminism.

Hutchinson, Adams, and Smith all advocated for women's rights in a male dominated society. Though they were from different centuries, the struggle remained the same. Hutchinson fought the battle in the church, Adams in the family, and Smith in the halls of power in Washington DC. Hutchinson was exiled to a neighboring state and excommunicated from the church that she loved. Adams was never able realize her dream of female equality.

Smith, while successful during her life, faced the downfall of the Federalists and the rise of the new Republicanism. Still, all three ladies continue to be admired as courageous figures in the struggle for civil rights.

Works Cited

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