

The Silent Revolution: An Analysis of Married Women's Move from the Domestic Sphere to the Political Sphere during the American Revolution

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Historians such as David Hackett Fischer and Gordon Wood portray The American Revolution as a clash of arms between American colonists and British soldiers, a toppling of a deep-rooted system of monarchy, and a passionate struggle to establish liberty in government. All of these descriptions are accurate, but ultimately incomplete. The American Revolution was a revolution in thought and society just as much as it was in arms. Mary Beth Norton and other scholars have argued that the revolution not only took place among male colonists; it also transformed men and women's perception of the duties of women, which is demonstrated both by women with political access, such as Abigail Adams and Martha Washington, as well as affecting groups of women in Edenton, North Carolina and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania without direct political access. My aim is to show that married women participated in the Revolutionary movement not merely because of their husbands – a patriarchic and shallow argument at best – but rather because the very idea of liberty and wartime sentiment transformed their duties from the private to the public sector. This eventually forced women nationwide to start thinking outside the sphere of domesticity. Women during the Revolution moved from serving their husbands inside the household to “serving” the army for their country. They also moved from thinking in only domestic terms, such as how certain events will affect their household, to thinking in political terms, such as how certain events will affect their country. This movement was caused by the war directly infringing upon their daily lives and also the discussion of the war's ideas among everyone, not just upper class white males.

William Blackstone captured contemporary views of women's roles and legal rights, as well as defined coverture, in early America in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England*. Blackstone noted that upon marriage, “the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband; under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything.”¹ Women clearly relied on men for nearly everything when married, from economic rights to rights of household affairs, down to the rights of their own children. This dependence was not due to coverture per say, but a precedential gender role.² Because of this way of life, women did not have any link to the public sphere (i.e. the political world) men were involved in by voting, running for office, serving on juries, and engaging in business.

Furthermore, married women managed the household and the children along with day to day domestic activities such as spinning, making products to consume from livestock, etc. As Laurel Thatcher Ulrich notes in *Goodwives*, women often acted as “deputy husband,” taking on economic affairs in place of their husbands, such as writing expense accounts when the husband was absent.³ Evidence from Mary Beth Norton's *Liberty's Daughters*, however, shows that even though women handled some economic affairs, they still were uninformed and unconfident when it came to actual business finance and matters of court dealings.⁴ Most at this time did not even know the financial struggles of their husbands. This was a huge issue, as the Stamp Act and Townshend Act created high taxes that caused many men to go into debt. Evidently, women conducted some affairs in the public sphere, but even then, as a whole they shared the view that their proper place was the private sphere. A Philadelphian woman named Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker summarized the above point when she said, “I am not acquainted with the extent of my husband's great variety of engagements. I stay at home, and my business I mind.”⁵

Unlike Mrs. Drinker, Abigail Adams expressed her opinions to her husband. Abigail Adams's letters have been quoted by a number of historians, which is due to the fact that her opinions were so well-articulated, but also because she was the wife of an influential man of the time. Yet, though John Adams kept Abigail informed of news and politics, their correspondences before the war do not show any political interest or knowledge on her end. Over time, however, the content of her letters changed dramatically with an increase in political interest, suggesting that married

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¹ Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1765-1769), 442.

² Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston: Little Brown Press, 1980), 6.

³ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Goodwives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England 1650-1750* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1980), 49.

⁴ Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 7-8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

women's roles shifted during the Revolution because of war and ideas of liberty gathered on their own accord, not solely through their husbands.

Abigail Adams, without her husband, not only had to take over many of his duties, but she was also cut off from much of the information she had been receiving about politics before. Her letter in September of 1774 to John said, "All my intelligance is collected from the news paper and I can only reply that I saw by that, that you arrived such a day...I want to know many more perticulars than you wrote me, and hope soon to hear from you again."⁶ This sense of desperation from being cut off from her husband forced Abigail to pay close attention to newspapers. The point might be raised that she was merely looking through the newspapers for mention of her husband and his affairs, and yet another letter, shortly before the above letter, showed she was paying just as close attention to her environment: "The great anxiety I feel for my Country...renders...the night unpleasent...Uncertainty and expectation leave the mind great Scope. Did ever any Kingdom or State regain their Liberty, when once it was invaded without Blood shed? I cannot think of it without horror."⁷ Clearly, the fact that the Revolution was on the home front (with battles literally very near to her home) played a large role in Abigail's unease. Because of this apprehension for the things close to her – family and country – she, like many other women, began raising questions about liberty and war. The letter above represents that Abigail had a distinct understanding of the politics of war (and its consequences), unlike Elizabeth Drinker, who left political thinking only to her husband. The "close-to-home" effects of war undeniably thrust women into considering things that happened outside of the home.

Abigail continued to write to John and express her frustration with not hearing from him more often. In 1776, they began a dialogue about politics, but John stated it must be kept with "great Discretion" due to enemy interceptions.⁸ His warning shows that the discussion was professional and complex enough that he thought it might reveal sensitive information. This is yet another example of women being forced to think outside of their comfort zone and rely on other pieces of news not fed to them by their husbands. Without information from their husbands, women had to look elsewhere for news. Furthermore, the letter reveals that Adams was starting to view his wife as an intellectual/political equal, and on the other side, she felt confident enough to talk politics with him. In fact, in numerous letters he directly answered her questions by giving her material to interpret. In a letter dated April 14, 1776, John Adams wrote, "You ask where the Fleet is. The inclosed Papers will inform you. You ask what Sort of Defence Virginia can make. ... Their Militia and minute Men have been training them selves, and they have Nine Battallions of regulars..."⁹ Rather than overlook Abigail's questions about war, politics, and business, John addressed them and did it as if he were talking to an equal who understood politics. The fact that he did this shows a transition from an earlier colonial woman, who resigns herself from politics, to a woman who is actively concerned with the affairs of the state. With this new concern, Abigail takes another step in assessing the world around her and the politics of the time.

Abigail Adams' most quoted words by historians today were penned in 1776 when she gave political advice to John about the construction of the new nation. Her words illustrated a leap from domestic thinking to political thinking as well as thoughts about the future and thoughts about liberty:

...in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticular 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.¹⁰

Abigail recognized that women in the present and past have not been treated favorably under the law, and directly challenged coverture by telling John to avoid giving husbands all the power. She even warned that if changes were not made, a Revolution by women was sure to occur. Furthermore, Abigail used language of the Enlightenment – representation, voice, unlimited power. This illustrated her understanding of the Revolution and what it should mean for all Americans, not just American men. Some historians such as Thomas Fleming disagree with my interpretation, saying "basically [John Adams] told her: Equality for Women? Forget about it..."¹¹ However, Abigail's husband recognized her understanding of the the Enlightenment and meaning of the Revolution for women. He said "Your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented.

⁶ Abigail Adams to John Adams, September 14, 1774, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA.

⁷ Abigail Adams to John Adams, August 19, 1774, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA.

⁸ John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 23, 1775, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA.

⁹ John Adams to Abigail Adams, April 14, 1776, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA.

¹⁰ Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA.

¹¹ Thomas Fleming, *The Intimate Lives of the Founding Fathers* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 133.

Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems.”¹² Essentially, John is challenging Abigail and other women to step up and get rid of patriarchy because men are unwilling to relinquish the control themselves. Clearly, something changed from Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker’s sentiments to the sentiments (from both men and women) during Revolution, and Abigail’s growing interest in politics shows that it was due to the Enlightenment, war, and nature of the American Revolution.

Martha Washington, much like Abigail Adams, was a lady with many connections, a good education, and doorway for opportunity; however, she was still a product of earlier colonial gender roles. At the beginning of the Revolution when her husband, George Washington had just been asked to be commander of the Continental Army, she received a letter from him asking her to fill her time with other things besides the war: “My unhappiness will flow, from the uneasiness I know you will feel at being left alone—I therefore beg of you to summon your whole fortitude & Resolution, and pass your time as agreeably as possible...”¹³ Although George Washington attempted to keep Martha out of the public sector and wartime sector for her own protection, she did not follow through with his request.

Later in the war, Catherine Greene, convinced Martha along with Lucy Knox, and Sarah Alexander – all wives of generals in the Continental Army – to form a club to follow their husbands, even at Valley Forge.¹⁴ Here the women entertained the soldiers and other generals, boosting the down-trodden troops’ spirits. Even when George Washington and other generals attempted to get them to leave, Martha and the others refused. A letter to Mercy Otis Warren from Martha illustrates this: “Mrs. Washington...thanks [Mrs. Warren] most cordially for her polite enquire... If the Exigency of affairs in this camp should make it necessary for her to remove, she cannot but esteem it a happiness to have so friendly an Invitation as Mrs Warren has given.”¹⁵ Once again, this shows an individual willingness to stay involved in the war and no longer be protected in the private sector. By the end of the Continental campaign, George Washington was actually indebted to their work, noting on his travelling expense accounts in 1783 “the importance to morale of Martha Washington’s journeys”¹⁶ Martha, along with the other women who traveled back and forth to Valley Forge, Cambridge, and other camps, demonstrate an eagerness to stay in the public sphere and solve the problems their husbands were having with their regiments. Abigail Adams and Martha Washington, however were individual women and also had husbands who were directly involved in the Revolution. Despite what seems like a rare opportunity for most women, evidence indicates that the Revolution and resistance mobilized other, less well-connected women across the states as well.

The Ladies of Edenton, North Carolina, in contrast to Abigail Adams, took a huge public political role and even published their opinions and actions. This was a giant step for females; they were not merely involving themselves in political thought, they were also involving themselves in the public sphere. They referred to themselves as “The Provincial Deputies of North Carolina” and were founded in 1774 in response to the policy of non-importation in Edenton, North Carolina. Even before we analyze their actions, we can draw a lot from their name. Since that term was applied to men in committees during the time, calling themselves “Deputies” gives the implication that they were a legislative body or at least members of a Revolutionary committee. Their name, in essence, calls attention to why the group formed – the same reason all Revolutionary committees were formed, which was to become engaged in the Revolutionary movement. The name the women gave to their organization shows what they thought it was equal to men’s committees. Also, the title tells us they thought their petition was just as valid as a legislative body, demonstrating that these women were comfortable publicizing their place in politics. Their petition, signed on October 25, 1774 read:

As we cannot be indifferent on any occasion that appears nearly to affect the peace and happiness of our country, and as it has been thought necessary, for the public good, to enter into several particular resolves by a meeting of Members deputed from the whole Province, it is a duty which we owe, not only to our near and dear connections who have concurred in them, but to ourselves who are essentially interested in their welfare, to do every thing as far as lies in our power to testify our sincere

¹² John Adams to Abigail Adams, April 14, 1776.

¹³ George Washington to Martha Washington, 18 June 1775, Library of Congress, George Washington Papers, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gwhtml/gwhome.html>.

¹⁴ Donald N. Moran, “The Ladies,” *Liberty Tree Newsletter* (September 2006), reprinted in *Sons of Liberty Chapter Revolutionary War Historical Article*, <http://www.revolutionarywararchives.org/greenecaty.html>, (Dec. 2011).

¹⁵ Martha Washington to Mercy Otis Warren, January 8, 1776, in *‘Worthy Partner’: The Papers of Martha Washington*, ed. Joseph Fields (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004).

¹⁶ George Washington Revolutionary War Expense Account, July 1, 1783, Library of Congress, George Washington Papers (Series 5, Financial Papers), <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gwhtml/gwhome.html>.

adherence to the same; and we do therefore accordingly subscribe this paper, as a witness of our fixed intention and solemn determination to do so.¹⁷

This petition was signed by over fifty women in North Carolina, and although they say they have a duty to follow the opinion of their husbands, the act of making a petition and doing something for the “public good” is a revolutionary deed in itself. It is clear they felt the new nation was just as much theirs as it was their husbands, when they say “the happiness of our country.” Furthermore, the petition states that they have a duty they owe to themselves, meaning they are acting separately from their husbands. They say they are acting on their own behalf, which again, highlights their individual eagerness to be involved in the politics of the Revolution.

Word of their petition even spread back to English newspapers. Philip Dawes drew a cartoon in the London Times mocking the Ladies of Edenton, who he called “A Society of Patriotic Ladies,” and portraying them as wenches, who ignored both their children and morals (in the image are women with low necklines and a child unattended on the floor).¹⁸ Women taking this type of public role was unheard of, and it shows that American women were breaking away from the codes of England, a nation that at one time was so similar to the colonies. Arthur Iredell, a relative of one of the signers in England read about the Edenton Ladies in the London Papers and asked, “Is there a female congress at Edenton, too?”¹⁹ This ridicule from English citizens mocked America and ideas of liberty, but additionally demonstrates how women’s roles were becoming vastly different from anything the English had known. Furthermore, England’s reaction shows that women’s new political involvement in the Revolution was caused by, for lack of a better wording, the Revolution itself. It is known that the group was controversial in the colonies by Arthur Iredell’s letter to his American brother, but the only evidence surviving about this group is from English newspapers.²⁰ However, we can imagine the impact the Ladies had on colonial men, being so similar to English men in their way of thinking about gender roles. Like Adams telling Abigail that men are unwilling to change their ways, the unchanged male view is apparent here because there is no evidence that American men ever addressed or cared about the comment regarding the Ladies.

Despite colonial men not changing their views, the Edenton Ladies had a large impact among women and sparked other groups to form and have “tea parties” as well. The Wilmington Tea Party actually “burnt their tea in a solemn procession” according to a Scottish woman named Janet Schaw.²¹ The ceremonial action of burning tea shows that these groups intended to protest non-importation, a radical act that male colonists were doing (the Boston Tea Party being a prime example). Protesting non-importation also shows that the domestic sphere was being invaded by politics. Household goods such as tea, clothing, and molasses were becoming political goods. It was a natural move for women to help the fight for liberty by protesting the goods they used every day.

If protesting was not radical enough, another group went so far as to start raising money for troops in addition to boycotting tea, making clothing for soldiers, and petitioning. The next group in Philadelphia attempted to break out of traditional women’s work, and overstepped some boundaries that sadly put an end the progress women were making at the time. Regardless, the group showed a transformation from wifely duties to womanly duties that could help the nation.

The Philadelphia Ladies Association began much like the Ladies of Edenton, but it went one step further by actively helping the soldiers and attempting to solve the financial problems of the Continental Army. The organization’s leader, Esther de Bert Reed, even published “The Sentiments of an American Woman” in 1780, which stated:

They [women] aspire to render themselves more really useful; and this sentiment is universal... Our ambition is kindled by the same of those heroines of antiquity, who... have proved to the universe, that, if the weakness of our Constitution, if opinion and manners did not forbid us to march to glory by the same paths as the Men, we should at least equal, and sometimes surpass them in our love for the public good.²²

¹⁷ “The Edenton ‘Tea Party,’” 25 October 1774, *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* (January 31, 1775), reprinted in *Historic Edenton and Countryside* (The Chowan Herald, 1959), 3–4.

¹⁸ Philip Dawes, “A Society of Patriotic Ladies, at Edenton in North Carolina,” March 25, 1775, Mezzotint, London, in *North Carolina: A Digital History*, ed. David Walbert (Chapel Hill: Learn NC, 2009), <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-revolution/4305>.

¹⁹ Arthur Iredell to James Iredell, March 26, 1775, in *North Carolina: A Digital History*, ed. David Walbert (Chapel Hill: Learn NC, 2009), <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-revolution/4305>.

²⁰ “The Edenton ‘Tea Party.’”

²¹ Janet Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality; Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal, in the Years 1774 to 1776* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921), 155.

²² Ester de Berdt Reed, *The Sentiments of an American Woman* (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1780).

This published paper, endorsed by the Philadelphia Ladies Association, is a turning point for women. Esther de Bert Reed acknowledged the failings of the Constitution, which shows she had a keen political understanding of it and its implications for women as a whole (similar to Abigail Adams). She also gave a reason for women to be involved in the public wartime sphere – simply to be more “useful.” All in all, the attitude expressed by Esther de Bert Reed exemplifies that wifely duties in the household alone were not enough anymore, and that war gave women a way to use their skills for the “public good” even if they could not gain public rights legally.

As mentioned, this select group of women raised money for soldiers in order to solve the financial crisis General Washington was having within the army. Reed’s records show that they raised “upwards of \$300,000 paper currency, or according to the existing depreciation, in specie about \$7500.”²³ These women were out going door to door, like a grassroots organization, to raise money for the army, not just their husbands. Raising money for the American army, which represents one cause of the Revolution with the financial burden from the Stamp Act, Townshend Acts, and debt acquired by those taxes, reveals the final stage of women’s transformation during the Revolution. Their actions were not simply on behalf of their husbands, it moved to something much larger.

Unfortunately, the Philadelphia Ladies Association was put to a stop shortly after raising money. When Esther de Berdt Reed sent a letter to General Washington explaining the purpose of the money, he wrote back “An idea has occurred to me, my dear Madam, which ...may perhaps extend the utility of [your] subscriptions. It is to deposit the amount in the Bank, and receive Bank notes in lieu of it to purchase the articles intended.”²⁴ Perhaps General Washington felt it was unorthodox to accept money from women as opposed to homemade goods such as shirts or blankets. Regardless of his reasons for rejecting the money, his action draws a distinct line within the public sphere: women’s public participation in the Revolution was limited to the domestic sphere or activities related to the domestic sphere. Any participation outside of that would either be a topic of controversy or put to a stop. Esther tried to give a logical explanation for why hard money would be more beneficial, but General Washington would not accept.²⁵ Only women’s wifely duties could move from the private to public sector, no matter how much George Washington could have used the money.

All in all, the Philadelphia Ladies Association along with its leader, Esther de Berdt Reed made great progress for women, and ultimately showed American men that women could possess and act upon a feeling of duty toward her country in addition to her husband. Another section of *The Sentiments of an American Woman* illustrated this point very well: “...Women have been seen forgetting the weakness of their sex...digging trenches with their feeble hands, [and] throwing themselves into the flames rather than submit to...a proud enemy.”²⁶ By saying that women had in the past, and could in the future put aside their gender roles for a common cause, gave American women hope for the future and the aftermath of the Revolution.

The American Revolution brought many ideas from the Enlightenment, and turned them into realities or in the very least, possibilities for women. Abigail Adams was forced to rely on newspapers, a frequent place for Enlightenment language, in her husband’s absence and started thinking in a manner as revolutionary as the Founders. Martha Washington was faced with the choice of staying in a sheltered estate or travelling to American troops’ camps. What was her decision? To boost morale among soldiers who were fighting for the American cause. As for the Ladies of Edenton and the Philadelphia Ladies Association, both immersed themselves in the public sector because they felt a need to participate in the same actions male colonists were taking; they felt they were equal. The evidence shows that in all these instances, women changed their actions from private to public and their thinking from domestic to political in the name of the Revolution and in the name of liberty, not in the name of their husbands. The American Revolution was indeed a struggle over a deep-rooted system, and although women did not completely break free of a patriarchal society, they at least unlocked the fetters they kept on themselves. By taking new actions outside of their providence and thinking in new ways, married women of the Revolution confirmed the grand effect liberty had on America.

²³ William Bradford Reed, *The Life of Esther de Bert Reed Afterwards Esther Reed of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: C. Sherman, 1853), 317.

²⁴ William Reed, *The Life of Esther de Berdt Reed*, 321.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 322.

²⁶ Esther de Berdt Reed, *The Sentiments of an American Woman*.