

Revolutionary Mothers

Chapter 10: There is No Sex in Soul

The American Revolutionary War era was a time of great change, not only in politics but rather, in every facet of life. Who would have believed that in these eight years the Colonists could take their independence from one of the most powerful governments in the world, England. The British had more weapons, supplies, and a larger, better-trained army. It goes to show that a dream and willpower has unlimited possibilities and some of that should be credited to woman.

Men's lives had changed in every way imaginable. They were no longer on their farms and in their homes with their families for extended periods of time. They quite often didn't get warm meals and a nice place to sleep. Life was far from normal but the dream pushed them forward. Women's lives changed fill the vacancies created by men at war. During the Revolutionary War women were in charge of things such as: cultivating farms, repairing structures, providing and education for the children, and instilling patriotism in her young.

An ongoing pre and postwar debate was about the opinion that "women were both morally and mentally inferior to men". In the eighteenth-century women were stuck with the reputation of being vain, superficial and materialistic and many were asked to stop buying the latest fashion from other countries as a way to instill American Pride. One woman, Judith Sargent Murray, to counter the opinion of many said "That Eve was indeed the weaker vessel, I boldly take upon me to deny-- Nay, it should seem she was abundantly the stronger vessel since all the deep laid Art of the most subtle fiend that inhabited the infernal regions, was requisite to draw her from her allegiance, while Adam was overcome by the influence of the softer passions merely by his attachment to a female..."^[1]

The lack of a formal education for women took the blame for causing women of this era to focus heavily on beauty, caretaking and household chores which didn't leave much time for academic achievement. It was also frowned upon for women to go out and get an education to make matters worse. It is a large scale belief that knowledge is power and there were some men who to some degree wanted to regulate the amount of power that "their" women held. Many women like Murray, Susanna Rowson, and Dr. Rush were among those that pushed for the creation of schools for woman to bridge this gap.

I find humor in that many critics believed that a formal education would create masculine women. They believed that acquiring an education would cause mothers to neglect their duties as a wife and mother, as one said "disgustingly slovenly in her person" and "indecent in her habits."²

Many women argued that an education would help them to invoke a strong sense of patriotism in their children. Women now believed they had responsibilities as both a mother and a wife that would require an education. The chapter states "a republican wife would keep her husband virtuous by her example." It was a way to show her civic duties and define the role of a woman. It also quotes a postwar woman saying that her task was to "inspire her brothers, her husband, and her sons, with such a love of virtue, such just ideas of the true value of civil liberty... that future heroes and statesmen.... Shall exhaltingly declare, it is to my mother I owe this elevation."³ Revolutionary War era women didn't want to completely abandon their prior beliefs of what a woman was to be but rather enhance them with knowledge, which would better serve them as a wife and mother. In 1787 a new school for women opened called the Philadelphia Young Ladies Academy. This metaphorically opened the door for a brighter future for women.

Women pushing for an education rarely discussed the possibilities of a self sufficient, independent future. Instead, it was a future that placed the role of an educated woman- a place in the home and family. It was a role to educate children with social, republican

responsibilities. “The equal share that every citizen has in the liberty and possible share he may have in the government of our country, make it necessary that our ladies should be qualified to a certain degree, by a peculiar and suitable education, to concur in instructing their sons in the principles of liberty and government.”^[4]

There were still some who wanted woman to be more equal to both opportunity and be able to play similar roles to men. Abigail Adams knew that with a new country, new laws would be written. Abigail, a woman who supported more equality among the sexes wrote a letter to her husband saying “..and by the way in the new Code of Laws, which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire that 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.”^[5] The two continued to write letters back and forth and interestingly John always told Abigail that there was not a chance. Abigail of course continued to insist but as she was only the wife of a politician, she could only hold to her new self-assigned role, that of an advocate for women.

From 1776 to 1807 a person was able to vote if they were free and had met certain property and residency requirements. In 1802 an anonymous writer had written an article about how easily men influence women’s votes and how they could become pawns in the politics game. He believed they could easily be used to influence the polls. Some even said that the man of the house would be determining the votes for all the voting women if they were allowed to vote.

Soon after the American Revolution, the people lost focus of women’s rights and re-gearred their efforts towards rebuilding the America. There was much to be done and they shifted their focus until a later date.

[1] Judith Sargent Murray to Miss Goldwaith, June 6, 1777, Judith Sargent Murray Papers, reel, vol. 1, Mississippi Department of History and Archives, reprinted in Berkin and Horowitz eds., *Women's Voices/ Women's Lives*, pp. 157-158.

[2] Quoted in Berkin, *First Generations*, pg 201.

[3] Quoted in Salmon, *The Limits of Independence*, pg 83.

[4] "Philadelphia, 1787", reprinted in Berkin and Horowitz, eds., *Women's Voices/ Women's Lives*, pg 194.

[5] Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776, *The Book of Abigail and John*, pp 120-121.