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Revolutionary Backlash

Women and Politics in the Early
American Republic

ROSEMARIE ZAGARRI

PENN

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To Bill, with love

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decades following the American Revolution the issue of women's rights was so explosive that after a brief moment of receptivity, American women and men chose to foreclose the debate rather than pursue it to its logical conclusion.

Despite, or perhaps because of, these constraints, Americans confronted—perhaps for the first time—the limits of their revolutionary ideology with respect to women. Women were excluded from government not because they lacked sufficient knowledge, intellect, or virtue but simply on the basis of their sex—because they were women. This also suggests the darker side of the democratic process: how the broadening of political opportunities for white males meant the increasing exclusion of white females. Rather than a straightforward march toward progress ending in women's achievement of full political equality with men, this story involves many false starts, much resistance, and many detours. Women had agency, but there were limits to their agency. Just as we can no longer think about the rise of American liberty during the American Revolution without also considering its underside, the role of slavery, so we should also understand that democratization for white males in the early republic resulted in the more deliberate exclusion of women from politics and governance. The consequences of this development continue to bedevil us even to the present day.



Chapter 1 The Rights of Woman

In 1798, less than ten years after the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, the writer Charles Brockden Brown, often considered the country's first professional man of letters, published an article on a controversial topic in his periodical, the Philadelphia *Weekly Magazine*. Entitled "The Rights of Woman," the piece depicted a dialogue between a young man, Alcuin, and his female acquaintance, Mrs. Carter. At one point Alcuin, the namesake of a medieval monk, posed a question to his companion, asking the woman about her preferences in terms of political parties. Instead of deferentially refusing to discuss such an unfeminine topic, Mrs. Carter went on the offensive. "What have I, as a woman, to do with politics?" she asked. "Even the government of our country, which is said to be the freest in the world, passes over women as if they were not [free]. We are excluded from all political rights without the least ceremony. Lawmakers thought as little of comprehending us in their code of liberty, as if we were pigs, or sheep. That females are exceptions to their general maxims perhaps never occurred to them. If it did, the idea was quietly discarded, without leaving behind the slightest consciousness of inconsistency or injustice."¹

Charles Brockden Brown had gone straight to the heart of a fundamental contradiction in postrevolutionary American society. Although the Revolution had been fought in the name of equality and natural rights, the American political system failed to embody those ideals for substantial portions of its population. It denied equal rights to all black people and to nearly one-half of the white population: women. Although the first organized resistance to slavery began to emerge at this time, there was no comparable movement for women's rights. Most historians, in fact, assume that the first widespread debates about women's rights did not occur until the decade or so preceding the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. Yet, as Brown's tirade suggests, the first agitation about women's rights can actually be traced to the years immediately following the Revolution, or even earlier, to Enlightenment discussions about the role of women in history and society. Although the American Revolution was not fought in an effort to promote women's rights, the commitment

to equality and natural rights created an unexpected conundrum. Would American women share in what the author Judith Sargent Murray called “the blessings of liberty”?² Or would the new country treat its women, as Brown claimed, merely like “pigs, or sheep”?

Women, Custom, and History

The relationship of women to the polity is part of the ongoing, long-term *querelle des femmes* that began during the Renaissance, continued through the Enlightenment, and gained new momentum after the American and French Revolutions. The Enlightenment, in particular, produced important shifts in the understanding of women’s role and status. In 1673 François Poulain de la Barre published a work in France called *The Equality of the Two Sexes*. Building on the Cartesian belief in the centrality of reason, Poulain argued that women’s physical traits did not impair their mental faculties. Men’s and women’s minds were essentially the same; the differences between their bodies were incidental to this more fundamental fact. Over the course of the eighteenth century, Poulain’s dictum “The mind has no sex” became widely accepted among the educated classes throughout the transatlantic world. If both men and women had the ability to reason, then women were as capable as men in the arena that mattered most: the realm of the intellect. John Locke’s *Essay on Human Understanding* provided a different kind of support for the possibility that men and women might have equal intellectual faculties. He proposed that the mind is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate shaped by the environment and education rather than by innate ideas. This explanation helped explain women’s apparent intellectual inferiority. Their deficiencies were the result not of inherent incapacity but of the failure to receive adequate educational opportunities. Embracing this notion, the English writer Mary Astell attacked men for their complicity in keeping women in ignorance. “Instead of inquiring why all Women are not wise and good,” wrote Astell in 1694, “we have reason to wonder that there are any so. Were the Men as much neglected, and as little care taken to cultivate and improve them, perhaps they would be so far from surpassing those whom they now despise, that they themselves would sink into the greatest stupidity and brutality.” The “Incapacity” of the female mind, “if there be any,” she concluded, “is acquired, not natural.” Given the same opportunities as men, women would be able to match their male counterparts in intellectual achievement.³

Around the same time, other thinkers also began to challenge the belief in women’s inherent inferiority. They recounted women’s roles and accomplishments in distant times and places. The very earliest women’s histories appeared during the Renaissance, beginning with Gio-

vanni Boccaccio’s *Concerning Famous Women* (1355–59) and Christine de Pisan’s *Book of the City of Ladies* (1404). During the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a whole new profusion of women’s histories appeared. Usually consisting of a series of biographical sketches, these works listed the accomplishments of notable “female worthies” from ancient times to modern, including women from the Old Testament, Roman matrons, Greek poetesses, famous queens, and female writers and thinkers. Significantly, these women succeeded in areas that were typically thought to be the province of men, such as literature, politics, government, and warfare. Playing to the tastes of an increasingly literate female audience, the women’s histories intended to set the historical record straight by recovering a story that had been lost, ignored, or suppressed. Conventional histories focused on men and “Eclipsed the brightest Candor of Female perfection.” Their purpose, according to one author, was to enlighten women as to “the history of their own sex.” Women, said another, would receive “a valuable proportion of the praise [they have] merited.” Women would have their own past. This would be nothing less than “An Historical Vindication of the Female Sex.”⁴

Judging by the pace of publication, the publishers were correct. Readers, especially women, seemed to have a voracious appetite for these works. Thomas Heywood’s *General History of Women*, published in England in 1657, was followed in 1686 by John Shirley’s *Illustrious History of Women, or A Compendium of the Many Virtues that Adorn the Fair Sex*. Others appeared in quick succession: Richard Burton’s *Female Excellency or the Ladies Glory* in 1688; and Nahum Tate’s *A Present for the Ladies: Being an Historical Account of Several Illustrious Persons of the Female Sex* in 1693. After the turn of the century, the genre gained momentum. James Bland issued his *Essay in Praise of Women* in 1735, while in 1752 the Oxonian George Ballard published *Memoirs of several Ladies of Great Britain, who have been celebrated for their writings and skill in the learned languages, arts, and science*. In 1766 *The Biographium Foemineum: or, Memoirs of the Most Illustrious Ladies of All Ages and Nations* appeared. French authors turned out similar works, some of which were translated into English.⁵

North American British colonists shared the motherland’s enthusiasm for women’s history. Not only did Americans import a substantial number of volumes, which were quite expensive, but they also began to print their own, cheaper editions. In 1774 a Philadelphia publisher issued William Russell’s translation of Antoine-Léonard Thomas’s *Essay on the Character, Manners, and Genius of Women in Different Ages*, which had been issued the previous year in London and was originally printed in France in 1772. In 1796 and 1800 Philadelphia editions of the anonymous work *Sketches of the History, Genius, Disposition, Accomplishments, Employments,*

Customs and Importance of the Fair Sex in All Parts of the World appeared. In addition, popular periodicals and literary magazines often excerpted portions of the histories, enabling the works to reach a larger audience.⁶

One of the most popular and influential works was William Alexander's two-volume *History of Women, From the Earliest Antiquity, to the Present Time; Giving an Account of Almost Every Interesting Particular Concerning that Sex, Among All Nations, Ancient and Modern*. (See Figure 2.) The work was first issued in London and Dublin in 1779, and excerpts were published in the *Boston Magazine* from December 1784 through July 1785. *The History of Women* appeared in two American editions, one in 1795 and another a year later. The 1796 printing alone listed more than 450 subscribers, including sixty-four women, booksellers such as Matthew Carey, and eminent personages such as General Thomas Craig, Governor Thomas Mifflin, and Supreme Court Justice James Wilson. References to the work abounded. Many American writers, including Judith Sargent Murray and Hannah Mather Crocker, explicitly cited Alexander's history of women in their own writings.⁷

Then as now, however, the lessons of the past were not self-evident or unambiguous. Different readers took away different lessons. For some, the histories provided proof that women could equal men in their intellect and achievements. The past provided a trove of evidence that could be marshaled in women's defense. In 1806, for example, the *Literary Magazine* proclaimed that Sappho, the poetess of ancient Lesbos, "soared above her sex in the wonderful endowments of her mind." Semiramis of Nineveh, it was said, ruled an empire in the ancient Middle East. Queen Christina of Sweden, observed the *New York Weekly Museum*, was noted for her prodigious learning and relinquished her crown rather than marry and "resign [her] liberty." More recently, England and America produced famous women authors, including Hannah More, Susanna Rowson, Charlotte Rowe, and Mercy Warren. Laura Bassi earned a doctorate in mathematics at the Institute of Bologna. Throughout history, it seemed, women had demonstrated the capacity to excel in the same areas as men did.⁸

Other readers, however, came to different conclusions. These observers criticized women from the past who displayed traits that they deemed masculine, such as leadership or learning. An article in the *Weekly Museum*, for example, condemned the female ruler of ancient Assyria, Semiramis, for her "cruelty" in power as well as her hideous murder of her husband. Another author unfavorably compared Elizabeth of England, who exhibited "the foibles of a weak woman," to her sister, Mary, Queen of Scots, who combined "the merit of a literary character [with] every female accomplishment." Their praise was reserved for women who most nearly conformed to contemporary feminine ide-



Figure 2. "Frontispiece: Virtue Dispersing the Clouds of Ignorance," from vol. 1 of *The History of Women, from the Earliest Antiquity, to the Present Time*, by William Alexander (Philadelphia, 1796). Alexander's *History of Women* was one of the most popular works in this genre that recovered women's achievements from the past. Although the caption below the figure suggests that Virtue dispels "the Clouds of Ignorance" surrounding women's past, the figure's scroll says "History of Women," suggesting that knowledge is as important as virtue. (Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.)

als of beauty, purity, modesty, or self-sacrifice. *Port Folio* magazine, for example, celebrated the French writer Madame de Sevigne because she was "always a woman; never an author, never a pedant, never a literary female. . . . A woman always loses by attempting to be a man." Another author claimed that although "we admire the masculine mind of Elizabeth, we love Mary Queen of Scots." Although women might have the ability to succeed in the same arenas as men did, they should not necessarily aspire to such goals. "It will generally be found," said the *New York Weekly Museum*, "that woman is better calculated to tread in softer and smoother paths; to leave the tumultuous bustle of public life, to spread light, cheerfulness, and felicity in less splendid circles." Thus the early women's histories could be read either to critique the gender status quo or to affirm it.⁹

Whether or not women's past actions gained approval, the histories presented irrefutable evidence of women's past accomplishments and, hence, of their current untapped potential abilities. Even if one believed that women should not aspire to achieve the same accomplishments as men, the histories demonstrated that women were capable of doing so. "The history of women," asserted the *Female Advocate*, "is forever intruding on our unwilling eyes, bold and ardent spirits, who no tyrant could tame, no prejudice enslave." Despite resistance, women in the past had overcome innumerable obstacles in order to succeed. In her *Gleaner* essays, Judith Sargent Murray noted that there were over 845 women "writers of eminence" in the past. "If the triumphs and the attainments of THE SEX, under the various oppressions with which they have struggled, have been thus splendid," she said, "how would they have been augmented, had not ignorant or interested men . . . contrived to erect around them almost insurmountable barriers." The "distinction" between men and women "was artificial, and not natural," insisted another author, and "there have always been instances of female intelligence and female merit to prove [it]." Women would not be deterred.¹⁰

Perhaps most important, the early histories of women revealed the bankruptcy of the belief in women's inherent inferiority. As William Alexander pointed out, women in the eighteenth century had failed to accomplish as much as their forebears had not because they were incapable but because of "all the disadvantages they are laid under by the law, and by custom." This meant that society had developed norms that limited women's role and restricted their choices. "Why," demanded an author writing in the *New-York Magazine*, "are the ladies condemned to remain in ignorance?" The answer, at least to this writer, seemed apparent: "It is because the majority of men have an interest in concealing knowledge from them." Custom and tradition, not nature, limited women's roles and possibilities.¹¹

This was a key insight. While inherent differences were immutable, custom could be changed. Hence, as Judith Sargent Murray put it, women "were naturally as susceptible of every improvement, as those of men." If women took responsibility for their own condition, they could change society. Women, proclaimed a young woman graduating from a female academy, should throw off "the shackles of custom, and dispel from our minds those clouds of ignorance and darkness, in which our sex has been too long involv'd." Once freed from customary restrictions, women's prospects seemed almost limitless. "The greatest concerns," declared the *Gentleman and Lady's Magazine*, "are not beyond their capacity." Although custom might be what Murray called a "tyrant," it was an oppressor that could be overthrown. Even those who disparaged women's past achievements as "masculine" would have to admit that.¹²

At the same time that the early histories of women were challenging the notion of women's inherent inferiority, Enlightenment thinkers posited a new conception of history, sometimes called "conjectural history," that moved women from the margins of the historical process to the center. Philosophers as diverse as Henry Home (Lord Kames), John Millar, David Hume, the baron de Montesquieu, and Condorcet all employed some version of this approach in their writings. In their view, societies progressed through a series of predictable stages along a continuum from savagery to civilization. Although the precise number of stages, ranging from four to twelve, varied according to each philosopher, the trajectory was similar.

In the first stage, the primitive or savage phase, life was simple, hard, and brutal. Men were hunters who spent most of their time mired in the basic struggle for subsistence. Over time, some societies moved beyond this basic level into the more auspicious pastoral phase of existence. Large numbers of people herded sheep and kept cattle. With their basic needs taken care of, life lost some of its brutality and harshness. An even smaller number of societies moved beyond this point into the agrarian phase. For people living in these societies, material existence became more secure. Inhabitants enjoyed a certain amount of comfort and leisure. Society began to shed some of its rusticity; people became more refined and cultivated. An even smaller number of societies moved into the final phase, the mercantile stage. Having escaped the demands of mere subsistence, commercial societies allowed people to escape the crudities of their earlier existence and cultivate their higher interests and pleasures. Inhabitants could spend time in learning, leisure, or the refined arts. These stages were not regarded merely as abstract theories. The natives of North America represented the primitive end of the spectrum, while modern Britain exemplified the other extreme, a nation

that had reached the pinnacle of civilization, refinement, and achievement.¹³

Significantly, conjectural historians portrayed women as key agents in the development of society and civilization. In their schema, women represented both an index to and an instrument of social advancement. The more a society progressed, the better it treated its women. In the lowest stage of civilization, women were regarded as nothing more than men's slaves, suitable primarily for sexual congress and physical labor. There was, according to William Robertson, "a cruel distinction between the sexes, which forms the one to be harsh and unfeeling, and humbles the other to servility and subjection." As society moved into the pastoral and agrarian phases, however, men treated women with more dignity and respect. "That women are indebted to the refinements of polished manners for a happy change in their state," commented Robertson, "is a point which can admit of no doubt." At the same time, women furthered social progress by cultivating men's higher instincts, refining their manners, and helping them discipline their more unruly passions. "The gentle and insinuating manners of the female sex," said Kames, "tend to soften the roughness of the other sex; and where-ever women are indulged with any degree of freedom, they polish sooner than men." Eventually women gained greater status and better treatment. They emerged from their status as chattel or as simple objects of lust and rose, according to Kames, "out of slavery to possess the elevated state they are justly entitled to by nature." In the highest stage of development, the mercantile phase, women enjoyed "that nearness of rank, not to say equality," as Hume put it, "which nature has established between the sexes." They now took their place as men's friends and companions. According to Millar, women were "encouraged to quit that retirement which was formerly esteemed so suitable to their character, to enlarge the sphere of their acquaintance, and to appear in mixed company, and in public meetings of pleasure." They became the social—though not political—equals of men.¹⁴

Conjectural histories helped American men and women appreciate women's contributions to society. Women had a crucial role in inculcating virtue, fostering manners, and promoting the civilizing process. "Female manners," observed John Cosens Ogden of New Hampshire, "must and ever will, form those of men. The latter are rude and savage, polished and refined, in proportion as the former are cultivated and softened." Society's treatment of its women would, in turn, reflect its degree of progress toward civilization. "There is no truth more generally admitted," noted the Reverend Samuel Miller, "than that every step in the progress of civilization brings new honour to the female sex, and increases their importance to society." American men and women knew

that their own society would be judged by these standards. "It is a fact," the *Weekly Museum* declared, "that in all ages of the world, in proportion as mankind have advanced in civilization, in the same proportion have the softer sex been esteemed and treated with respect." As men's friends and companions, women gained dignity, respect, and a modicum of equality.¹⁵

Acknowledging women's centrality to society made it easier to envision the possibility that women might contribute to the polity as well. In a monarchy women's place was primarily ornamental. In a republic where the people governed themselves, women could shape the values and ideals of the populace. "[Although] the men possess the more ostensible powers of making and executing the laws," observed an Independence Day speaker, "the women, in every free country, have an absolute control of manners: and it is confessed, that in a republic, manners are of equal importance with laws." In their role as wives and mothers, women could instill virtue and inculcate patriotism in their children, husbands, and neighbors. Addressing the women attending his lectures on the law in 1790, the lawyer James Wilson emphasized the significance of women's contributions. "To protect and to improve social life," he said, "is, as we have seen, the end of government and law. If, therefore, you [women] have no share in the formation, you have a most intimate connexion with the effects, of a good system of law and government." Through their influence over men, women could have a crucial, if indirect, influence on the polity. They might have a political role to play.¹⁶

Women and the American Revolution

The new Enlightenment histories of women and stage theories of social change created new perceptions of women's roles and possibilities. Writing in 1803, the American Presbyterian minister Samuel Miller noted, "One of the most striking peculiarities of the eighteenth century . . . is the change of opinion gradually introduced into society, respecting the importance, capacity, and dignity of the *Female Sex*." The effect, as he saw it, amounted to nothing less than "a revolution radical and unprecedented with respect to [women's] treatment and character."¹⁷

Yet this was a revolution of a certain kind—a change in the understanding of women's intellectual capacity and social contributions rather than the achievement of political rights and privileges. Before the American Revolution the popular perception remained that politics and government were exclusively male realms. Although women had certain rights, their status was inferior to that of men. Only men could vote and hold public office. Only men could attend meetings of the colonial assemblies, hold positions of power at court, serve in the military, collect

customs duties, or be appointed governor. Men so thoroughly monopolized government and politics that the prevailing belief was that women either had no opinions about these subjects or, if they did, should not express them.

Yet even before the American Revolution, small numbers of elite women in both England and America had already begun to express an interest in politics and a desire to participate in government. Aristocratic women in England attended balls, salons, and court ceremonies, which gave them access to and influence over political figures. The English civil war and Glorious Revolution produced a torrent of works written by women on political subjects ranging from the state of the monarchy, succession, and republican government to the prospect of foreign war. By the early eighteenth century some British women had grown dissatisfied with their inferior legal status and had begun to protest publicly against the system's inequities. In a 1735 petition to Parliament, one group of women condemned the "Hardship of English Laws in Relation to Wives," which, they said, "put us in a worse Condition than Slavery itself." Claiming their privilege as "Free-born Subjects of England," they sought redress of their grievances, requesting more equitable treatment in terms of property rights, widows' portions, and physical safety at the hands of their spouses. Writing a few years later, a woman calling herself "Sophia, A Person of Quality," produced the published tract, *Vindication of the Natural Right of the Fair-Sex to a Perfect Equality of Power, Dignity, and Esteem, with Men*. Not only did the author maintain that women were men's intellectual equals, she also claimed that women were as fit as men to govern and hold public office. "I think it evidently appears," she declared, "that there is no science, office, or dignity, which Women have not an equal right to share with Men: Since there can be no superiority but that of brutal strength shewn in the latter, to entitle them to engross all power and prerogative to themselves; nor any incapacity proved in the former to disqualify them of their right, but what is owing to the unjust oppression of the Men, and might be easily removed." Continuing this line of investigation, the 1758 pamphlet called *Female Rights Vindicated* protested against women's exclusion from government and probed the nature of women's "Obligations to civil Society." According to the tract's female author, "women in general are as fit for the offices of state, as those who commonly fill them." By the 1780s and 1790s British radicals such as John Gale Jones, William Hodgson, Thomas Cooper, and Jeremy Bentham, associated with clubs such as the London Corresponding Society and the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society, were advancing propositions supporting women's equality and natural rights, including women's right to vote.¹⁸

Women in colonial British North America also experienced political

stirrings. Two editions of the British tract *Female Grievances Debated* were printed in the colonies between 1731 and 1758. In fact, the Custis family of Virginia—Martha Washington's family of origin—owned the original English edition. Colonial newspapers sometimes printed pieces that satirized men's treatment of women or challenged women's subordinate status. A poem published in Virginia in 1736 and South Carolina in 1743 declared,

Then equal Laws let Custom find,
And neither Sex oppress;
More Freedom give to Womankind,
Or to Mankind give less.

Other pieces picked up on the theme of women's subjugation. A poem from 1743, subsequently reprinted in other publications, described marriage as woman's "wretched" fate, a condition that changed the man into a "tyrant" and the woman into a creature bound by a "Slave's Fetters." The Englishwomen's 1735 petition to Parliament was reprinted in 1788 in Philadelphia's *Columbian Magazine* under the heading "A Tract on the Unreasonableness of the Laws of England, in regard to Wives." Though it appeared without editorial comment, the implication seemed to be clear.¹⁹

As in Britain, however, the predominant norm in colonial British America held that women should neither interest themselves in politics nor involve themselves in the business of government. Nonetheless, a long-term growth in women's literacy and the increasing availability of political information, particularly newspapers, meant that more women in British America could read about politics and form their own opinions. In 1734 during the controversy over the prosecution of the printer John Peter Zenger for seditious libel, a reader of the *New-York Weekly Journal* complained to the editor that women in the colony were "contenting about some abstruse Point in Politicks, and running into the greatest Heats about they know not what." Hoping to quell the outburst, he dismissed their comments, saying, "Politicks is what does not become them." Yet some women apparently continued to express political views. "The Men," reported Esther Edwards Burr in 1755, "say . . . that Women have no business to concern themselves about [politics] but [should] trust to those that know better." Although men complained, women did not always defer to their judgment.²⁰

By and large, however, most women remained reluctant to transgress into what was understood to be male territory. Even Mercy Otis Warren, who would become one of the most accomplished women authors of her generation, responded timidly when her friend John Adams first

spoke to her about the subject of politics. In a letter written in 1776, Adams asked Warren what form of government she would prefer for the newly independent United States. In reply, she expressed her hesitancy to speak to the issue, fearing that a discussion of "war, politics, or anything relative thereto" was off-limits to women. She wondered whether his query was "designed to ridicule the sex for paying any attention to political matters." Only after she received his explicit reassurances did she dare "approach the verge of any thing so far beyond the line of my sex."²¹

This state of affairs could have persisted indefinitely if not for the American Revolution. The American Revolution marked a watershed in the popular perceptions of women's relationship to the state. Almost as soon as the controversy began in the 1760s, Whig leaders realized that the effectiveness of their resistance to Britain depended on their ability to mobilize popular support. This included women. Women's support, they knew, would be critical to the resistance movement against Britain and could affect the course of the war. Significantly, patriot leaders did not presume that American women would automatically follow their husbands' lead. Schooled in Enlightenment theories about women, many men believed that women had an equal capacity to reason. Just as skeptical farmers, merchants, artisans, and mechanics would have to be persuaded to aid the resistance movement, women too would have to be won over to the cause.

It is plausible, even likely, that women had played some role, direct or indirect, in determining the outcome of previous wars, conflicts, and rebellions throughout history. What was different about the American Revolution was the nature and extent of the appeals to women. The more extensive use of print media made this change possible. Newspapers, magazines, and broadsides reached out to women in a direct, widespread, and public fashion. Using poems, essays, plays, and orations, male political leaders urged women to join in the effort. During the 1760s they asked women to boycott imported luxury goods, produce homemade textiles and clothing, and give up drinking British tea. Once armed resistance began, they asked them to sacrifice the conveniences of life, take over their husbands' duties at home in their absence, and, if necessary, be willing to offer their men's lives for their country on the field of battle. Printed appeals drew women to the cause.

Women responded with a widespread outpouring of support. During the 1760s women in Boston, Massachusetts, and Edenton, North Carolina, signed formal agreements to abide by the boycotts forbidding the importation of British goods. In other places women organized local chapters of the Daughters of Liberty as female counterparts to the Sons

of Liberty, held patriotic spinning bees, or wore homespun as a sign of symbolic sacrifice. Soon after declaring independence, New Yorkers topped a leaden statue of George III on the Bowling Green. Seizing the opportunity, the women of Litchfield, Connecticut retrieved the statue and transformed the broken pieces into over forty-two thousand cartridges to supply the Continental Army with ammunition. Once the war began, some women sewed shirts or knit stockings for Washington's desperately needy troops. Still others took even more direct action. In 1780 Esther DeBerdt Reed spearheaded a drive in Philadelphia to collect funds for the Continental Army. In towns throughout Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey, and Virginia, women went door to door soliciting funds to assist the warring war effort. Participating in the revolutionary movement in their own ways and on their own terms, women made themselves a political force.²²

At the grassroots level, women came to realize that their personal response to the Revolution could have an impact on the course of the war itself. The new nation needed thousands of men, year after year, to fill offices in the new state and federal governments, to serve in the militia or the Continental Army, and to represent the country as ambassadors abroad. When men left home to take up arms or serve in government positions, they depended on women to take over their duties on the farm, in business, and within the family. Women often had little prior training or experience in supervising these matters. Economic conditions were difficult; war-time shortages and inflation made matters worse. The trials of family life without a father present caused untold emotional strains.

Women's willingness to shoulder men's burdens and become what Laurel Ulrich has called, in another context, a "deputy husband" gave men the freedom to participate in the war effort. Yet women were well aware of the personal costs. Helen Kortright Brasher of New York City recalled that although she supported the Revolution, she resented her husband's absences from home. "He had formerly been a most domestic man; now he was forever out of his house surrounded with gentlemen conversing on politics; every evening out at some meeting or other haranguing his fellow citizens, writing for the public prints; in short the whole city experienced the unhappy change and every family was more or less in the same painful situation."²³

Not all women responded equally willingly to the calls for sacrifice. Differences in women's responses suggest important ways in which women could influence their husbands' political choices and ultimately affect the course of the war. While some women rose to the new challenges, or at least accepted the responsibilities grudgingly, others refused or resisted. This was true even among families of the leaders of

the revolutionary cause. Abigail Adams represented a paragon of female revolutionary patriotism. Her husband John was, of course, a stalwart of the resistance movement. Beginning as a young lawyer, he quickly moved into a leadership position in the Massachusetts Assembly and then during the early years of the Revolution became one of the central figures in the new Continental Congress. Beginning in 1778 he went abroad for several years to negotiate treaties, first with France and then with Britain. During these long separations Abigail bore the full burden of managing the house, farm, and family without her husband. Although Abigail proved to be a skillful "farmeress," as she called herself, she always grieved her husband's absence. Anticipating John's arrival for a quick trip home in 1775, she poured out her despair to her friend Mercy Otis Warren: "I find I am obliged to summon all my patriotism to feel willing to part with [John] again. You will readily believe me when I say that I make no small sacrifice to the publick." Warren sympathized with her plight as her own husband was often gone for long periods on public business. "The frequent Absence of the best of friends," she wrote to Abigail, "prevents to you and to me the full enjoyment of the Many Blessings providence has kindly showered Down upon us. . . . But while the sword and the pestilence pervade the Land, and Misery is portion of Millions, why should we expect to feel No interruption of Happiness." Abigail Adams nonetheless repeatedly gave her blessing to her husband's choices and supported his decision to serve the public.²⁴

In contrast, Mercy Otis Warren chose not to be as self-abnegating as Abigail Adams was. Both were avid patriots. In the 1770s, Mercy, in fact, had written several satirical plays and numerous poems attacking British tyranny and, in particular, the treachery of Massachusetts lieutenant governor Thomas Hutchinson. Her husband, James, began his political career in the mid-1760s and served for over ten years in the Massachusetts General Court. An early leader of the resistance movement in his hometown of Plymouth, he also served during the war as a member of the state constitutional convention, as an officer in the Massachusetts militia, on the federal navy board, and in various other offices. These duties frequently entailed absences from home lasting anywhere from several weeks to several months. By 1780 Mercy had had enough. She urged her husband to retire from public service and return home to be with her. "I am sometimes Ready," she wrote to James, "to think you could serve the public better unencumbered by anxieties for me, but I am not Hipocrite Enough to conceal the secret Regrets that pray upon my mind and Interrupt my peace." Her entreaties convinced him. Despite the fact that the war had not yet been won and the business of state building had just begun, he essentially withdrew from public service. As Warren's case demonstrates, patriotic appeals to women were

not simply rhetorical exercises. If women were unwilling to sacrifice for the cause, their husbands might be less likely to participate as well. Women needed to subordinate their own private happiness for the sake of the common good—and act more like Abigail Adams than Mercy Warren.²⁵

Aware of their dependence on women, men realized that they would ignore "the sex" at their peril. Throughout the war, patriot leaders publicly praised women's sacrifices and stoked the fires of female patriotism. By recognizing women's political efforts and contributions, they politicized women, acknowledging their capacity as political agents. Women felt a new sense of empowerment. In a poem on the Townshend boycotts against the British goods, Warren highlighted the importance of women to the plan's success: by "quit[ting] the useless vanities of life," women would "at once . . . end the great political strife." Their actions would "bless, or ruin all mankind." Similarly, Milcah Martha Moore of Pennsylvania emphasized the ability of women to provide leadership during the crisis over the Tea Act:

Let the Daughters of Liberty, nobly arise,
And tho' we've no Voice, but a negative here,
The use of the Taxables, let us forbear. . . .
That rather than Freedom, we'll part with our Tea.

Instead of being simply followers, women would lead the way and "point out their Duty to Men." Having suffered numerous adversities, they came to believe that their patriotism equaled any man's. Carrying on while her husband was a British prisoner, Mary Fish of Connecticut declared, "I have the vanity to think I have in some measure acted the heroine as well as my dear Husband the Hero." American women were, as Esther DeBerdt Reed put it, "Born for liberty."²⁶

Once independence was achieved, men reinforced women's new-found sense of themselves as political actors. In public speeches and published articles, they repeatedly acknowledged women's support and praised their contributions to the revolutionary cause. Like men, women had felt the scourge of British tyranny and suffered through a multitude of deprivations and hardships. "Though ruin and desolation pervaded your country, and those to whom you [women] were bound by the dearest ties were insulted, outraged and imprisoned," proclaimed John Fauchereaud Grimké, "still you remained firm and undismayed in the conscientious discharge of your duty." Celebrating women's cooperation, they acknowledged their contribution in achieving victory over Britain. Both sexes, noted Richard Dinsmore, "gloried in the appellation rebel." Although female patriotism was, as Keating Lewis Simon

noted, more “of a kind entirely suited to their sex,” women had fully earned the country’s esteem. “Our heroines, in their place,” concluded Solomon Aiken, “were not a whit behind our foremost heroes.”²⁷

These appeals had effects that lasted well beyond the war. Print culture established a vehicle through which patriot leaders might reach out to large numbers of women and involve them in the revolutionary cause. Women received public recognition for their activities. In acknowledging women’s importance to the cause, men affirmed women’s capacity to act as political agents. Their actions not only affected the fates of individual families but also had an impact on the course of the war, politics, and society. Although the Revolution did not necessarily radicalize women, it did politicize them in ways and to an extent that had never before occurred. They started to see themselves—and were seen by others—as political beings. No longer were they politically invisible.

Rights and Revolution

Before the Revolution, the notion of women’s subordination to men permeated American society. The doctrine of coverture assumed that women were not independent legal agents. Before they were married, they were under the guardianship of their fathers. Once married, their husbands acted in their stead. Without a separate legal identity, women could not sue or be sued in court, make contracts, or own property. In addition, the assumption that they lacked an independent identity extended far beyond statutory prescriptions. Young women were supposed to defer to their fathers’ opinions; married women, to their husbands. Their lives were defined with reference to home and family. Women were not supposed to travel alone, speak in public to audiences that included men, or become too learned. Their exclusion from political rights was an assumed given, seldom questioned or discussed.²⁸

It is undeniably true that at the beginning of the war for independence, most American leaders would never have dreamed that their struggle against Britain would turn into an attack on the gender status quo. Yet, like all revolutions, the American Revolution produced its share of unintended consequences. No single person or group could control the direction of events or the flow of ideas. This was especially true with regard to ideas about women’s relationship to the state, their involvement with politics, and their political rights and privileges.

The most crucial development was the growing centrality of the principles of equality and natural rights. Originally, of course, these ideas were meant to pertain primarily, if not exclusively, to men. During the 1760s and 1770s American colonists found themselves in an ongoing political struggle with Britain. Initially they protested against British poli-

cies by insisting on their rights as Englishmen. As British subjects, they claimed to share in a long tradition of English rights that included the right to trial by jury, the right to petition, the right to freedom of speech, and a right to be taxed only when they were properly represented in their legislatures. When Britain repeatedly dismissed or ignored Americans’ protests, the colonists realized that they must seek other grounds on which to justify their claims. By 1776 many Americans believed that Britain had violated not only their rights as Englishmen but also their God-given natural rights, inscribed in nature. The Declaration of Independence justified independence by asserting men’s natural equality and by invoking the “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.” Natural rights commanded assent because they were said to be inalienable, immutable, and universal—possessed by virtue of one’s personhood rather than as a result of citizenship, parentage, or wealth. Such claims were hard to refute.

Yet unbeknownst to the revolutionaries, these concepts could take on a life of their own.²⁹ Equality and natural rights had an elastic quality, capable of almost infinite expansion and extension. If these principles were universal in nature, as was contended, why did they not apply to other dispossessed groups, such as poor white men, black people, or women? One of the first areas to be challenged was the property qualification for voting. As was the case in Britain, the North American British colonies allowed only those who met certain property qualifications to vote for members of their colonial assemblies. Colonists assumed that those who owned property had a greater stake in society and a greater interest in the deliberations of the legislature than those who did not. Property owners, moreover, were believed to be more independent and virtuous than the propertyless masses, who might be susceptible to bribery, manipulation, or corruption. In England electors had to own a forty-shilling freehold to vote for members of Parliament. In most of the colonies a similar requirement was established, sometimes based on acreage rather than land value. In practice, however, the same principle had very different implications in the two places. Whereas in England, due to the shortage of land, no more than 20 percent of adult males could vote, in the colonies, because of the widespread cheapness and availability of land, between 50 percent and 80 percent of all white males could vote. What had been a restrictive requirement in Britain was inconsequential in America. Even before the Revolution, then, a majority of white men were enfranchised.³⁰

Even so, once the Revolution began, the very existence of property qualifications for voting started to bother some members of society. As states began to write their first constitutions, agitation for lowering or eliminating property qualifications became a subject of debate. Some

commentators pointed out the inconsistency in allowing men to fight and die for their country but not allowing them to vote. Others pointed out that by expanding the franchise, state governments would broaden their base of popular support. Still others noted that if Americans believed that those who paid taxes should be represented, then all taxpayers, not just owners of real property, should be enfranchised. The most powerful argument, however, was that if all men were truly created equal and shared the same natural rights, then all men should be entitled to vote.³¹

Inspired by these sentiments, William Sullivan wrote a letter in May 1776 to his friend John Adams in which he made the case for universal suffrage. Responding with alarm, Adams pointed out that all societies operate on the basis of “general rules,” or commonly agreed-upon conventions. These conventions may or may not have a rational basis. With regard to voting, Adams said, many groups were excluded from the franchise, including women, children, and those who were not mentally sound. Some of these exclusions were somewhat arbitrary. He pointed out, for example, that while a twenty-one-year-old man could vote, an equally qualified man who was only “twenty years eleven months and twenty-seven days old” could not. Such norms and distinctions, Adams claimed, were necessary for society to maintain order and prevent chaos. He defended the property qualification because, among other things, it represented a clear and distinct line of demarcation. Those who possessed enough property could vote, and everyone else was excluded; there was no ambiguity. Adams, however, had a bigger fear—a suspicion that revolutionary ideology might produce a larger movement to eradicate distinctions between the social classes. Without property qualifications, he believed, there would be no sound basis for excluding other groups in society from the franchise, including women. The elimination of property qualifications, he said, would “confound and destroy all distinctions, and prostrate all ranks to one common level.” Significantly, Adams instinctively grasped what many other people at the time did not: that the rationale for excluding women from government rested on certain agreed-on social conventions rather than any inherent reason. Thus even before women agitated for the vote, Adams perceived the direction in which revolutionary ideology might lead.³²

Before the Revolution, questions had seldom arisen about whether women could or should be able to vote. At the same time, although all voters were men, voting itself was not necessarily defined as an exclusively male prerogative. In fact, fewer than half of the colonies—Pennsylvania, Delaware, Georgia, Virginia, and South Carolina—used the word “male” in their election statutes or otherwise specifically excluded women. Women’s exclusion may have been regarded as so self-

evident that it did not require a specific prohibition. Because of the legal doctrine of coverture, married women, under the guardianship of their husbands, could not own property. Although widows and single women could own property, they constituted just a small fraction of the population. Hence the question of women voting did not often arise. Even so, it is significant that women were not alone in their disfranchisement. Substantial numbers of white males (from 20 percent to 50 percent) and in most colonies all free black males also did not meet the property qualifications and thus were excluded from the franchise. Thus, while it is true that women did not have the right to vote, neither did a lot of men. Class, not sex, represented the primary basis for inclusion or exclusion.³³

The issue of female suffrage did not receive a great deal of public attention during the War for Independence itself. A few writers, such as James Otis and Thomas Paine, published articles that mentioned the notion of women voting, but they did not take up the issue in a sustained fashion. In 1790 in the *Massachusetts Magazine*, Judith Sargent Murray published an essay called “On the Equality of the Sexes,” which demanded greater educational opportunities for women. She did not, however, address the question of women’s political rights. In private letters and discussions, the issue of female suffrage did start to surface. Individuals such as Rachel Wells, and Mary Willing Byrd, and others began to broach the subject in letters to friends, family, and spouses. Hannah Lee Corbin of Virginia, for example, challenged her brother, the revolutionary leader Richard Henry Lee, as to why she, as a taxpayer woman, was not allowed to vote even though she met the state’s property qualifications to do so. Having recently asserted the principle of “no taxation without representation” against the British, Lee was put on the defensive. He admitted that neither “wisdom” nor “policy” offered valid reasons “to forbid widows having property from voting.” The best he could offer was to point to custom and tradition: it had “never been the practice either here or in England.” Though he promised that he “would at any time give my consent to establish their right of voting,” the issue went no further.³⁴

Today many historians cite Abigail Adams’s letter of March 31, 1776, to her husband as a plea for woman suffrage. In this letter Adams reflected on the imminence of independence and contemplated what that meant for the country. She then proposed to John, who was at that time a member of the Continental Congress, that the members of the new assembly “Remember the Ladies” when they prepared a new code of laws for the nation. “Be more generous & favourable to [women] than your ancestors,” she said. “Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could.” John responded with a combination of patronizing condescen-

sion and weak humor. "As to your extraordinary Code of Laws," he said, "I cannot but laugh. . . . We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Altho they are in full Force, you know they are little more than Theory. . . . We have only the Name of Masters." If "we give up this," he continued, men "would be completely subject" to the "Despotism of the Peticoat." In fact, despite the playfully defiant tone of her remarks, Abigail probably was not demanding the vote. She was more concerned with married women's lack of property rights and lack of protection against abusive husbands. Moreover, while the letter is well-known today, it was a private missive intended for John's eyes only. Although Abigail did mention her concerns at the time to her good friend Mercy Otis Warren, her ideas did not reach a larger public audience at the time. Whatever the case, John's reply indicated that he was resistant even to discussing the issue.³⁵

Abigail Adams's letter, however, did make an important point: women understood the principles of the American Revolution and could apply them to their own situation. Thus when John Adams received William Sullivan's letter shortly thereafter raising the question of expanding the male franchise he could clearly see the ultimate implications of the proposal. In fact, in his response to Sullivan, Adams admitted that many women were as intelligent and well-informed about politics as some men were. They possessed "as good judgments, and as independent minds, as those men who are wholly destitute of property." Their abilities raised the stakes for abolishing the property qualifier among males. If women had as much wisdom and virtue as men, then on what basis could women be excluded? John Adams wanted to foreclose such possibilities before they ever became real threats. Unlike Abigail's letter to John, the letter to Sullivan did not remain private; it was published in 1792 in a popular Philadelphia magazine.³⁶ More than most of his contemporaries, Adams understood the fragile assumptions that underlay the social order and gender hierarchy. Ironically, he was uncannily accurate in predicting how the logic of the debate over both universal male suffrage and the female franchise would ultimately unfold.

The New Jersey Exception

At the very time that Adams was ruminating about the dangers of women voting, one state actually experimented with that possibility. In May 1776, anticipating the coming of independence, the Continental Congress sent out instructions ordering each state to devise a new framework for governing. Meeting in convention, the legislature of New Jersey wrote a new state constitution. Describing who would be entitled to vote, the document stipulated that "all inhabitants of this colony of full age,

who are worth fifty pounds . . . shall be entitled to vote for Representatives in Council and Assembly; and also for all other public officers, that shall be elected by the people of the county at large." The use of gender-neutral language—"all inhabitants"—was not in and of itself significant. In fact, only five of the first state constitutions—those of New York, Georgia, South Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts—specified that the vote be limited to men, by using the word "male," or inserting a reference to "sons." Since voting had customarily been a male prerogative, there probably was little need to be more specific.³⁷

It soon became clear, however, that the New Jersey legislators had more radical intentions. Their initially ambiguous formulation gave way to more unequivocal assertions. Although in 1777 and 1783 the legislature enacted laws regarding election procedures that used only the male pronoun, beginning in 1790 the assembly passed an election statute, pertaining to seven of the thirteen counties in the state, that explicitly enfranchised women. It said, "No Person shall be entitled to Vote in any other Township or precinct, than that in which *he or she* doth actually reside at the time of the Election" (emphasis added). A 1797 law extended these privileges to all qualified women throughout the state. Voters, the law stated, should "openly and in full view deliver *his or her* ballot." Seldom has the use of a single pronoun effected such a radical change in political practices.³⁸ (See Figure 3.)

In actuality, the New Jersey law applied only to a small proportion of the women in the state. Because married women could not own property, and voting required ownership of a substantial amount of property, widows who had inherited their deceased husbands' estates were the women most likely to vote. Although single women who had never been married could theoretically exercise the franchise, they were less likely to have accumulated enough wealth to meet the property qualification that the constitution required. As a result, female suffrage in New Jersey never pertained to more than a small proportion of the state's female population. In any given election, it was likely that not more than a few hundred cast ballots. Nonetheless, among those who qualified, women could vote—and did vote—in both state and federal elections for a time.³⁹

Due to the lack of documentary records, we do not know why New Jersey legislators were willing, when no other state was, to extend the vote to women. There is no indication that New Jersey women actively demanded the vote. They did not send petitions to the legislature, hold rallies, or mount campaigns on their own behalf. Some historians speculate that Quaker delegates, grounded in their religion's more egalitarian ideas about women, may have been behind the initial efforts to enfranchise women. Other historians argue that by the 1790s partisan Federal-



Figure 3. Women voting in New Jersey (n.d.). This rare depiction of women casting ballots in a New Jersey election was probably printed in a periodical in the mid- to late nineteenth century but portrays events occurring in New Jersey from 1776 to 1807. (The Library of Congress.)

ists believed that enfranchising women would give them an edge over their Republican opponents. It is true that the 1790 law applied only to the seven southern New Jersey counties, which were heavily populated by Quakers and more politically conservative. By 1797, however, the legislature had expanded the privilege to all qualified women throughout the state.

In fact, New Jersey legislators seem to have given women the vote because they followed their revolutionary beliefs to their logical, if unexpected and untraditional, conclusion. Reviewing the history of female voting in New Jersey, a Trenton newspaper from the time maintained that the assembly had acted “from a principle of justice, deeming it right that every free person who pays a tax should have a vote.” If those who paid taxes should be allowed to vote, there was on the face of it no logical reason why taxpaying women should be excluded. Other newspapers confirmed this rationale. Discussing a debate over a proposed election law in 1800, the *Newark Centinel of Freedom* published a letter that

reported, “A motion was made to amend the bill by adding that ‘it is the true intent and meaning of this act that the inspectors of elections . . . shall not refuse the vote to any widow or unmarried woman of full age.’” As it turned out, the legislators defeated the motion—not because they objected to women voting but rather because they found it superfluous: “The House unanimously agreed that this section would be clearly within the meaning of the Constitution and as the Constitution is the guide of inspectors it would be entirely useless to insert it in the law.” The conclusion seemed obvious: “Our Constitution gives this right to maids or widows, black or white.”⁴⁰

Others outside of New Jersey understood the experiment in similar terms—as an extension of revolutionary ideals. “Single Females in the State of New Jersey, possessed of a certain property, and having paid taxes, are entitled to vote at elections,” reported a Boston newspaper in 1800. “We understand that at a late election, there were many [who] exercised this privilege.” Abigail Adams also was aware of these developments. Discussing a recent election held in her sister’s home parish, Adams declared mischievously, “Tell [your friend that] if our State constitution [in Massachusetts] had been equally liberal with that of New Jersey and had admitted the females to vote, I should certainly have exercised it on his behalf.” Adams’s plea for women had found an unexpected fulfillment in New Jersey’s experiment in female suffrage.⁴¹

The practice remained extremely controversial. Many people at the time believed that female voting degraded the political process, masculinized women, and undermined male authority. Even critics, however, understood the rationale behind the innovation. At a Fourth of July oration at the local Presbyterian church in Morristown, New Jersey, Henry Ford of Morristown remarked, “Our constitution requires a voter to be possessed of 50 pounds. The prevailing theory is that taxation and representation should go together.” Yet he believed that the theory had gone too far and said, “Our practice outstrips them both, in its liberality, and makes no invidious exceptions. It admits to the pole people of all sexes, colors, tongues, characters, and conditions. In our unbounded generosity, we would admit to a participation in our choicest rights the lame, and the halt, and the blind [as well as] . . . the worthless and the penniless;—as motley a group as the day of Pentecost or the pool of Bethesda ever witnessed.” Another critic, William Griffith, admitted the legality of the practice: “If we were to be guided by the letter of the charter, it would seem to place [women] on the same footing in this particular [with men].” Nonetheless, he insisted that “it is perfectly disgusting to witness the manner in which women are polled at elections. Nothing can be a greater mockery of this invaluable and sacred right, than to suffer it to be exercised by persons, who do not even pretend to any

judgment on this subject." Another skeptic concluded, "The petticoat faction's a dangerous thing." Even as they attacked the practice, however, opponents of female suffrage had conceded the validity of the principle.⁴²

Whatever their reservations or objections, members of both political parties in New Jersey courted female voters and sought their support for their candidates. Especially in close elections, women might provide the margin of victory for one side or the other. Because only women who owned a substantial amount of property were entitled to vote, women voters, much to the dismay of the Republicans, tended to favor Federalist candidates. Yet neither side in New Jersey ever lost its doubts about the wisdom of enfranchising women. A poem published in 1797 in a Newark newspaper captures the conflicting feelings surrounding the New Jersey experiment. Called "The Freedom of Election," the poem was to be sung to the tune of "The Battle of the Kegs," which suggests its satirical purpose.⁴³ The opening stanza appears to celebrate New Jersey's liberality for enfranchising women:

In freedom's cause you gain'd applause,
and nobly spurn'd subjection;
You're now the *Oracle of Laws*,
and *Freedom of Election!*

A subsequent stanza appears to support women's new opportunities and condemn the "narrow-minded" policies that promoted women's subordination. It even suggests that men's freedom was linked with women's liberty:

That tho' we read, in days of yore,
The woman's occupation,
Was to direct the wheel and loom,
Not to direct the nation;
This narrow-minded policy
By us hath met detection;
While woman's bound, men can't be free,
Nor have a *fair Election*.

Later stanzas, however, disclose the author's true beliefs. The poem portrays an election scene in which women voters "parade" to the poll, "some marching cheek by jole [jowl], sir!" Women voting presented a sight so "strange" and so unnatural that it seemed a "*Milennial* state was near, sir!" There were other problems as well. While the deluded

women went off to vote, predatory men subjected the women who stayed behind to their unwanted sexual advances:

While men of rank, who play'd this prank,
beat up the widows' quarters;
Their hands they laid on every maid,
And scarce spar'd wives, or daughters!

Allowing women to vote, then, was nothing more than a sexual "prank" played on women by "men of rank." Yet the practice had opened up the possibility of further trouble. Women would not be satisfied merely with the vote; they would soon seek to pursue other male prerogatives:

To Congress, lo! Widows shall go,
Like metamorphos'd witches!
Cloth'ed in the dignity of state,
And eke! in coat and breeches!

Women who sought political privileges abandoned their femininity and literally became like men. "Cloth'ed in the dignity of state," they would dress like men, "in coat and breeches." In the process they would become "metamorphos'd witches," repugnant aberrations of their true feminine selves.

The final stanza appears once again to celebrate female suffrage and proclaim the end of men's oppression of women:

Then Freedom hail—thy powers prevail
O'er prejudice and error
No longer shall man tyrannize
And rule the world in terror.

Although the poem recognizes women's claims to political equality with men, its hostility is even stronger. The closing lines reveal the poem to be a vicious satire:

Open wide your throats
And welcome in the peaceful scene
Of Government in petticoats!

Female suffrage would be accepted only if it were literally shoved down people's throats.

Continuing ambivalence meant that the female franchise was con-

stantly under attack from one quarter or another. In session after session the New Jersey legislature considered proposals that would abolish female voting. For a time a sufficient number of members rallied, out of either principle or interest, to preserve the experiment, but this would soon end. The precipitating cause was a local election in 1807 in which the voters of Essex County were to decide on a new location for their county courthouse. Citizens of Newark and Elizabeth each hoped that their town would prevail. A courthouse, they believed, would bring business, economic development, and prestige to their locale. On election day boosters on each side beat the bushes to turn out the vote. Voting was heavy. After the votes were counted, Newark claimed victory. Charging fraud and corruption, the citizens of Elizabeth demanded a recount. When they investigated, state officials found that more votes had been cast than the number of legal voters in the county. Observers claimed that men and young boys had dressed up as women in order to cast multiple ballots for their side. "Their dress favouring disguise," reported one commentator, "it is said that some have repeated the vote without detection."⁴⁴

In the ensuing scandal, the legislature voided the election results. Claiming an opportunity to eliminate voter fraud, Federalists and Republicans in the legislature joined together to make a Faustian bargain. Federalists, who had benefited from the women's vote, and Republicans, who had enjoyed the support of free blacks, each agreed to relinquish the votes of the group that the other considered suspect. The assembly passed a law disenfranchising both women and free blacks, the groups that were least well represented and least able to defend themselves. Significantly, there is no evidence that either free blacks or women publicly protested their loss.⁴⁵

Perhaps, given the circumstances, women may have suspected that any kind of public protest would be fruitless. For women, however, voting presented a host of problems that had never been satisfactorily resolved. At the most practical level, it was inconvenient. Women often lived substantial distances from their polling places. Because respectable women did not travel alone, they always needed male family members or friends to accompany them to the polls. The atmosphere at the election site may have also represented a deterrent. It was not uncommon for voting to occur at taverns or other public places. Riotous drinking was typical. Groups of drunken or disorderly men often mulled about outside. Fights, or even riots, were common. Investigating a 1794 election, one congressman noted casually, "If the committee are to break up every election where persons were seen drunk, they will have a great deal of work upon hand." At every stage women would have felt uncomfortable and out of place, subjected to unwanted scrutiny and possible ridicule.

Responding to his sister's query about voting rights for widows, Richard Henry Lee noted that while he supported the idea in principle, he "thought [it] rather out of character for women to press into those tumultuous assemblages of men where the business of choosing representatives is conducted." Only the most determined women—or women goaded on by ambitious male politicians—would have braved such obstacles. Many may have been relieved once they no longer had to do so.⁴⁶

There may have been other reasons as well why women did not object to the loss of the vote. It was understood that New Jersey had pioneered female suffrage by extending to women the principle of no taxation without representation. At this time, voting was considered a privilege of private property. In colonial Anglo-America this was the common and widely accepted understanding of the franchise. In fact, north of the border in lower Canada, from 1791 until 1834 unmarried women with property also were allowed to vote.⁴⁷ In neither place did women object when their legislatures reversed this decision and withdrew their privilege. Women may have reasoned thusly: because members of the assembly granted women the vote, they also had the authority to take it away. In later decades, once voting came to be seen as a natural right belonging to all people, the consequences of denying the vote to individuals or groups would be much more severe.

Despite the reversal, New Jersey had taken a profound step. Allowing women to vote had made the unimaginable a reality. Women could behave politically in the same ways and on the same terms as men. Perhaps even more important, the New Jersey legislators appear to have acted out of principle. Those in power—white males—understood that if they took their revolutionary ideals seriously, then they must, in the interest of fairness and consistency, allow women to vote. What had started out as a justification for rebelling against Britain ended in a critique of gender inequality.

Women as Rights Bearers

Citizenship at this time was understood to encompass privileges much broader than simply the ability to vote. With the coming of independence, all free white inhabitants who had been subjects of the Crown, including white women, were presumed to be citizens. Yet the precise meaning of "citizenship" was vague, subject to changing legal and popular definitions. At various times in American history, "citizen" could refer to all inhabitants, all white inhabitants, all legal nonaliens, white male residents, or just to male voters. Significantly, the language in the new United States Constitution tended to be gender-neutral, employing

the term "person" rather than "male" or "men." No provision explicitly excluded women from voting or holding federal office. In fact, only in 1868, with the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment, did the Constitution employ the phrase "male citizen" and explicitly exclude women from certain political rights.⁴⁸

It is not clear whether the earlier use of gender-neutral language was deliberate or accidental. Nonetheless, some people at the time believed that at least some provisions of the Constitution were meant to encompass women. In particular, Article I, Section IV describes who should be counted in the census in order to determine the ratio of people to congressional representatives for each state. While it was clear that only three-fifths of the total number of slaves would be represented, white women were to be counted on an equal basis with white men. Explaining the significance of this point to his wife, Sen. Samuel Mitchill of New York noted, "In the theory of our Constitution women are calculated as political beings. They are numbered in the census of inhabitants . . . and the Representatives are apportioned among the people according to their numbers, reckoning the females as well as the males. Though, therefore, women do not vote, they are nevertheless represented in the national government to their full amount." As part of the enumerated population, women thus were members of the body politic. They were, as Mitchill said, nonvoting "political beings." In this sense, women were represented "virtually" in much the same way that the North American British colonists were represented in Parliament before the Revolution.⁴⁹

Even if they could not vote, women actually did enjoy many specific rights and liberties. Widows and single women received the same protections for their property as men did. More importantly, to the extent that the Constitution, and especially the Bill of Rights, shifted the focus away from the rights of property owners and toward the rights enjoyed by all human beings, women were included and protected. They could practice their religion freely, assemble to protest governmental actions, and exercise free speech. If accused of a crime, a woman, like a man, had the right to receive a trial by jury—though the jury would be composed exclusively of men. As the president of Harvard College pointed out in 1798, every citizen, female as well as male, enjoyed "the right to life and personal security, . . . the right to liberty of action, the right to reputation, the right to liberty of opinion, of speech, and of religious profession and worship." If citizenship was understood to encompass rights besides voting, the Constitution did indeed guarantee a broad array of civil liberties to women as well as men.⁵⁰

For women of the early republic, one of the most important of these liberties was the right to petition. Petitioning the legislature represented

a crucial means for women, who lacked the vote, to express their political sentiments directly to their legislators. Petitioning was a powerful and time-honored tradition in the Anglo-American political tradition. For centuries women in both England and the colonies had petitioned their colonial assemblies on a variety of matters. After the Revolution, American women, inspired by notions of popular government, seemed to have seized on the petition as a preferred means of expressing their grievances and asking for redress from their legislators. In Massachusetts, as the historian Nancy Cott has shown, the number of women petitioning the legislature for divorce increased at a far greater rate than the population growth would suggest. In North and South Carolina, as Cynthia Kierner has demonstrated, the number of women's petitions increased tenfold in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. These women were often asking for compensation of some sort: restitution of property, military pensions for widows, payment for confiscated land, or requests for husbands' back pay as the result of military service. Women also believed that the new national legislature should be responsive to their needs. Between 1789 and 1820 at least 246 women submitted petitions to the new U.S. Congress. Among these, the vast majority (83 percent) sought compensation for losses or payment of military pensions related to the American Revolution.⁵¹

Whether or not their petitions were granted, the very fact that women petitioned their governments revealed the extent to which they felt a stake in or a connection with the formal institutions of governance. Their actions implied that women believed that the government was, in some real sense, their own and accountable to them. Janet Spurgin, for example, had a husband who had been a loyalist during the American Revolution. Afterward his property was confiscated and he fled to Britain, leaving his wife and eight children behind in North Carolina. Asserting her status as a loyal American, Janet Spurgin petitioned the North Carolina Assembly in an effort to recoup some of the property. She had, she asserted, "always behaved herself as a good Citizen and well attached to the government" and believed it "extremely hard to be deprived of the Common rights of Citizens."⁵² Like Spurgin, many women saw themselves as good citizens, a part of the government, not apart from it. In subsequent decades women would frequently turn to petitioning as a vehicle of social reform, appealing to the federal government on a variety of moral, social, or religious issues. Long before that time, however, women had begun to use the petition in order to act as "political beings" in their own right.

The acknowledgment of women's civil liberties also implied something even more significant. Women were understood to be autono-

mous beings who possessed rights. By recognizing that women had rights, the state acknowledged that it also had a responsibility to protect women—not as adjuncts to their husbands or fathers but as separate and distinct individuals. The fuller meaning of this idea became apparent after the publication in 1792 of Mary Wollstonecraft's incendiary tract *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft was an unlikely revolutionary. A self-educated young woman who traveled in radical literary circles in London, she followed the early years of the French Revolution with great interest and anticipation. When the French proposed a system of national education for men but ignored the education of women, Wollstonecraft penned her treatise. Deliberately echoing the title of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, published the previous year, Wollstonecraft's work exposed the gendered assumptions behind the revolutionaries' thinking. While Paine had argued that all human beings shared certain basic rights, the specific rights he mentioned—the rights to own property, to vote, to participate in government—were, in fact, limited only to men. Typically for his time, Paine did not even consider whether women had rights or what those rights might be.⁵³

In contrast, Wollstonecraft explicitly applied the concept of natural rights to women. Given by God, these rights were universal, inherent in the condition of being human, and they applied to all people, regardless of sex. Women's rights were thus irrevocable and undeniable. "If the abstract rights of man will bear discussion and explanation," she insisted, "those of woman, by parity of reasoning, will not shrink from the same test." Yet while only some men had been denied their rights, all women had been excluded from enjoying their rights simply because of their sex. "The rights of humanity have been . . . confined to the male line from Adam downwards." The greatest social inequity, she claimed, did not exist between or among males but between men and women. The result was that half of the population had been kept from realizing its full human potential. "The tyranny of man" and the perpetuation of a "male aristocracy" had oppressed women in all aspects of their lives, retarding the development of their intellect, hindering the growth of their virtue, and preventing them from making a full contribution to society.⁵⁴

Significantly, Wollstonecraft mentioned but did not emphasize the question of women's political rights. She raised the issue of female suffrage only once, and then only briefly and tentatively. "I may excite laughter," she noted, "by dropping a hint, which I mean to pursue at some future time, for I really think that women ought to have representatives." She never took up the issue again. It was more important, she believed, that women gain greater educational and economic opportunities than to participate in what she considered to be a deeply flawed

and corrupt political system. The franchise would presumably come in the wake of other gains.⁵⁵

As in Britain, many Americans at first responded favorably to Wollstonecraft's work. Excerpts from *A Vindication* appeared almost immediately in American periodicals and magazines such as the *Ladies Magazine* published in Philadelphia and the *Massachusetts Magazine* published in Boston. By 1795 three American editions of the volume had been issued. A modern study indicates that Wollstonecraft's treatise appeared in more American libraries of the era than Paine's *Rights of Man* did.⁵⁶

Personal scandal, however, soon tarnished her reputation. In 1798, soon after Wollstonecraft's death, her husband, the freethinking radical philosopher William Godwin, published a memoir of his wife. Committed to an unflinchingly honest portrayal, Godwin mentioned details about Wollstonecraft's life that had not been widely known. During the French Revolution, he said, Wollstonecraft had had an affair with an American man, Gilbert Imlay, and gave birth to an illegitimate child. Subsequently she tried to kill herself not once but twice. After taking up with Godwin, but before they married, she conceived their daughter (who, as Mary Shelley, would later author the classic work *Frankenstein*), whose birth resulted in her death. These actions represented an assault on the conventional Christian morality of the time and provided ample ammunition for Wollstonecraft's critics. Her "licentious practice," railed the minister Samuel Miller, "renders her memory odious to every friend of virtue."⁵⁷

Despite the scandal, Wollstonecraft's tract popularized the notion of women's rights and introduced the phrase into widespread usage. Whereas the American Revolution had raised the question of women's rights indirectly, Wollstonecraft's work raised the issue directly, in a way that could not be avoided. Numerous pieces of poetry, fiction, humor, and prescriptive essays bore the title "The Rights of Woman" or contained allusions to women's rights. Songs were written on the subject. In 1795, for example, several different periodicals published the same piece "Rights of Woman," written by a "Young Lady" of Philadelphia. Sung to the tune of "God Save America," the piece began:

God save each Female's right,
Show to her ravish'd fight

Woman is Free;

Let Freedom's voice prevail,
And draw aside the veil,
Supreme Effulgence hail,
Sweet Liberty.

The poem continues,

Let Woman have a share,
Nor yield to slavish fear.
Her equal rights declare,
And well maintain.⁵⁸

Although the precise meaning of “women’s rights” remained ambiguous Wollstonecraft was claimed as “a friend.”

In subsequent years the concept of women’s rights took on a life of its own. A widespread public debate ensued over what it meant for women to have rights and whether women shared the same rights, including political rights, as men. Occurring outside of formal legal channels, in venues such as novels, essays, periodicals, and public speeches, the phrase became a staple of popular discourse. As early as 1793 Congressman Elias Boudinot could announce, “The Rights of Women are no longer strange sounds to an American ear; they are now heard as familiar terms in every part of the United States.” A 1799 article noted that Wollstonecraft’s work had “quickly become a staple commodity at the circulating libraries, saw two editions in the year of its publication, was the manual and vademecum of every romantic Miss.” An 1818 article declared that “there are to be found, some females who delight to make the ‘Vindication’ . . . their text book.”⁵⁹ Wollstonecraft became the chief symbol and enduring referent for the notion of women’s rights in the United States.

So pervasive was Wollstonecraft’s influence that even those who opposed her felt obliged to refute her in her own terms. An 1801 essay entitled “A Second Vindication of the Rights of Women” invoked Wollstonecraft—only to reject her central claims. Another adversary, a Maine orator, minced no words. Speaking to the women in his audience, he insisted, “You will not consult a Wollstonecraft for a code of ‘The Rights of Women.’ Do not usurp the rights of man; they are essentially distinct. Scorn her principles.” In 1818 Hannah Mather Crocker, a descendant of the Puritan minister Cotton Mather, published her own refutation, entitled *Observations on the Real Rights of Women, with their Appropriate Duties, agreeable to Scripture, Reason, and Common Sense*. Although highly controversial and deeply contested, the concept of women’s rights could no longer be ignored. By the first decade of the nineteenth century, even a hardened Wollstonecraft hater had to admit that her “ingenious vindication of the *Rights of Woman* [was] universally known.”⁶⁰

Acknowledging that women had natural rights opened up other possibilities. If women shared in the same constellation of God-given rights as men did, then women were what modern political theorists call “rights

bearers.” Implicit in this concept was an understanding that women were separate individuals who were distinct from men and who possessed their own rights and responsibilities. They were, in this sense, equal to men. As rights-bearing individuals, women gained the moral authority to demand that the state protect their God-given natural rights from infringement or usurpation. As Wollstonecraft herself pointed out, if men refused to recognize that women had rights, then “by the same rule, their duties vanish, for rights and duties are inseparable.” White women, in particular, enjoyed a privileged status. They were unlike slaves, who were considered to be outside the social compact, and they were different from free blacks, whose race was often invoked to disqualify them from possessing the same rights and privileges that white men enjoyed.⁶¹

Even when the meaning of the phrase “women’s rights” was vague or imprecise, it evoked a whole new world of possibility for women. In 1796 Harvard graduate William Boyd devoted his entire commencement address to the subject of “Woman.” After hailing women’s contributions throughout world history, he pointed out how little women’s status had changed over time: “Still lives this truth, by savage man confess’d / *Woman belov’d, yet Women the oppress’d.*” Ending his speech with a solemn vow, another commentator concluded, “I shall always be found among the foremost to contribute my feeble efforts to defend THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN.” This insight led some commentators to acknowledge men’s role in oppressing women. In 1800 the *National Magazine* quoted the English radical Thomas Cooper, declaring, “Let the defenders of male despotism answer (if they can) *The Rights of Woman*, by Miss Wollstonecraft.” To Americans, the analogy was clear. Just as England had stifled America’s freedom, so men repressed women. “It appears ever to have been the policy of our sex,” a Boston man said, “to arrogate to themselves a superiority over the other, and to treat them with all the spirit of a petty tyranny.” Acknowledging the fragile basis of male authority, he noted, “We seemed to have claimed a prescriptive right for calling them our inferiors, and we can give no better account of our authority for treating them as such, than that custom has so established it.” Although the solution was vague, the problem was now widely acknowledged.⁶²

Others found the prospect of women’s rights more troubling. Women’s assertion of rights might subvert the gender hierarchy and threaten the subordination of women to men. Even the terminology itself seemed to open up dangerous prospects. Discussions of “equality of right,” worried “A Lady,” might “excit[e] an insurrection in the female world.” A man calling himself “Ignotus” agreed: “If once a man raises his wife to an equality with himself, it is all over, and he is doomed to become a

subject for life to the most despotic of governments." Nothing, he decided, "was more dangerous to the rights of man [than] when it took possession in *the home department*." Not only would the relations between the sexes be affected, but the whole family structure might suffer as well. A satirical poem called "The Rights of Both Sexes," originally published in England and republished several times in the United States, warned of the possibility of ludicrous role reversals. Men would "reside at the tea-table, regulate the household, and rule the nursery; while all the offices of state and business of commerce should pass into the hands of the ladies." Men might even end up, the poem warned, as a "wet-nurse" to the baby. As each sex took over the other's "employments, amusements, and cares," the whole world would be turned upside down. What was good for women, then, might be bad for men. "These *Rights of Woman*," concluded a Massachusetts newspaper, "would become the *wrongs* of man."⁶³

Long before the American Revolution, Enlightenment conjectural histories and the earliest histories of women challenged the notion of women's inherent incapacity and raised the possibility that custom and tradition explained their apparent inferiority to men. Changed circumstances, it was said, would allow women to achieve as much as men could, perhaps even in traditionally masculine arenas such as philosophy, literature, government, and politics. Over the course of the eighteenth century, these ideas elevated women's status and focused public attention on their standing in society. Women, it seemed, might well be men's social and intellectual equals.

The coming of the American Revolution gave these ideas a political salience and created new opportunities for women to participate in politics. Responding to men's appeals, women engaged in a variety of actions in support of the revolutionary cause, which led women to experience a greater sense of connection to and involvement with the polity. After the war their political contributions were praised, celebrated, and remembered. Instead of political ciphers, women now were seen as political beings who had the capacity to influence the course of war, politics, and history.

Even more important, Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* changed the terms of the debate, suggesting that women shared in the same natural rights enjoyed by men. As rights-bearing individuals, women were independent beings who enjoyed certain rights simply because they were human. Unlike slaves or free blacks, white women were also understood to have the moral authority to demand that the state protect their rights. Wollstonecraft's work appeared when women in New Jersey were actually casting ballots. Ultimately, it was less signifi-

cant that New Jersey women lost the franchise than that the experiment in female suffrage had been tried. These developments raised the stakes for women immensely. Whereas the Revolution had addressed the question of women's rights obliquely, now the question arose directly, in a way that could not be avoided. Whether they wanted to or not, American men and women had to confront the meaning of their revolutionary principles for women.

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Chapter 1

1. The piece was one installment in a series called "Rights of Women: A Dialogue," originally published in the *Weekly Magazine of Original Essays, Fugitive Pieces, and Interesting Intelligence* 1 (Philadelphia), March 10, 1798; March 17, 1798; March 24, 1798; and April 7, 1798. The quoted section appears in the April 7, 1798, issue. The series constituted parts 1 and 2 of Brown's novel *Alcain* and was published anonymously that same year as a pamphlet: [Charles Brockden Brown], *Alcain: A Dialogue* (New York: T. & J. Swords, 1798). Parts 3 and 4, which contained additional material that was even more incendiary than that in the first sections, celebrated the notion of free love and challenged the institution of marriage. These parts were published in 1815, five years after Brown died. Quotations are from a modern edition of the entire novel: Charles Brock-

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36. “Copy of an Original Letter from Mr. John Adams, to a Gentleman in Massachusetts,” *Universal Asylum & Columbian Magazine* (Philadelphia), April 1792, 219–22.

37. Constitution of New Jersey—1776, in *The Federal and State Constitutions, Colonial Charters, and Other Organic Laws of the States, Territories and Colonies Now or Heretofore Forming the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1909), 5:2595; William Smith, *A Comparative View of the Constitutions of the Several States with Each Other, and with that of the United States* (Philadel-

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38. Although some historians claim that women's enfranchisement in New Jersey was an accidental oversight, more careful students of the episode confirm the deliberate nature of the legislature's actions, at least by the 1790s. Prior election laws in 1777 and 1783 used only the male pronoun. In the 1790 and 1797 laws, the phrase “he and she” was used. See “Election Law of 1790,” in *Acts of the 15th New Jersey General Assembly, Nov. 18, 1790*, 670; and “An Act to Regulate an election of members of the legislative council and general assembly, sheriffs, and coroners, in this State,” in *Laws of New Jersey, 1797*, for the precise wording. See also Judith Apter Klinghoffer and Lois Elkis, “The Petticoat Electors: Women's Suffrage in New Jersey, 1776–1807,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 12 (summer 1992): 159–93; Edward Raymond Turner, “Women's Suffrage in New Jersey: 1790–1807,” *Smith College Studies in History* 1 (July 1916): 156–87; Kruman, *Between Authority and Liberty*, 191n85; Carl Prince, *New Jersey's Jeffersonian Republicans: The Genesis of an Early Party Machine, 1789–1817* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964), 134n7; Irwin N. Gertzog, “Female Suffrage in New Jersey, 1790–1907,” in *Women, Politics, and the Constitution*, ed. Naomi B. Lynn (New York: Haworth Press, 1990), 47–58.

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Chapter 2

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