

Women in the Early Republic

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The field of U.S. women's history in the early republic presents unusual opportunities and challenges for scholars and teachers. The four decades that separate 1790 from 1830 have until recently remained a relatively underworked segment of the field, being bracketed at either end by the revolutionary and the Jacksonian eras, two periods far more event-laden and therefore, frankly, easier to teach. A glance at general U.S. history survey textbooks for the high school and college markets confirms this: chapters on the Revolution introduce daughters of liberty and republican mothers and then typically drop women as a topic until the 1830s when the cult of domesticity, the Lowell mill girls, and female reformers and abolitionists take their turns briefly on the center stage. The traditional history of the intervening years of the early republic has long been framed by a narrative of political and economic events—the rise of the party system, contested elections, embargoes and the War of 1812, courts and banking, the Missouri Compromise, canals and steamboats. These events, of so masculine a cast, appeared to leave little room for attention to women.

But it was not merely an unrelentingly masculine narrative that squeezed out the women. In part, this hiatus developed because of the initial conceptualization of the field of women's history. Back in the early 1970s, an emerging generation of scholars in pursuit of women's past was naturally drawn to the mid nineteenth century, a period marked by women's social activism and the first women's rights movement. Here there were female public figures with life stories to be told, along with organizations, conventions, strikes, manifestos, and agendas to be explained. Historians were also able to recover patterns in the lives of ordinary white women, because the spread of female literacy generated abundant manuscript and printed sources. The books, periodicals, and newspapers of the period offered evidence both of real women's lives and of an all-encompassing, sentimentalized, often cloying ideology of women's proper sphere (variously called the cult of true womanhood or the cult of domesticity, terms pioneered by historians Barbara Welter and Aileen Kraditor in the 1960s). Private letters and diaries allowed more immediate access to the world of women and permitted reconstruction of daily domestic life, female friendships, and what was termed "women's culture," seen as distinctly different from the realm of men.

The revolutionary years also beckoned to early scholars, because the research questions were so compelling. How did this democratic revolution, stirred by high-minded pronouncements about the equality of all men and the civic virtue of citizens, make any difference to the place of women in the polity? Two signal books of 1980, Mary Beth Norton's *Liberty's Daughters* and Linda Kerber's *Women of the Republic*, led the way in showing the gradual politicization of women and the impact of revolutionary ideology on thinking about gender. Both books left off in the 1790s on a cautiously rising note, showing that some women were indeed beginning to claim a special female contribution to the healthy workings of the republic. Kerber coined the apt phrase "republican motherhood" to capture a sentiment promoted and widely endorsed in the 1790s: the idea that women best served the republic by becoming educated, virtuous mothers able to train their sons to be the thinking, rational citizens required by a government founded on the consent of the governed. In a bold stroke, republican motherhood incalculably advanced the cause of women's education and led to the founding of many female academies, even as it perpetuated the notion that women's most salient connection to the state was channeled through maternal duties. In short, the legacy of the revolution was mixed, one of potentialities that remained to be realized.

In contrast, the years after the 1790s and up to the Age of Jackson have been much less attended to. Let me venture to guess that most college courses in women's history skip right over it. With few timeline-worthy events to point to, and few famous women to anchor a lecture, the years understandably get short shrift, especially in a course that has to cover a lot of ground in ten or fourteen weeks. Yet the historical processes inaugurated during those early years clearly are crucial for explaining the newly evolving gender system of the later nineteenth century. I became convinced of this back in the 1980s, when I encountered the intense puzzlement of my students at the midpoint of my course. Lectures and readings would take them up through the Revolution, capped by the midterm exam; then the following week would open with the antebellum decades, leaving them to ask in bewilderment: what happened to those potentially powerful ideas about women's advancement through education? How could the stifling glorification of domesticity replace the sturdy version of woman's sphere exemplified by Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren?

Texts produced for this specialized market perpetuate the problem, for they also bound over the chasm between republican motherhood and the cult of domesticity. Nancy Woloch's standard survey, *Women and the American Experience*, moves from a pair of chapters on the eighteenth century to a second pair on the early nineteenth, where the dates 1800-1860 appear in the chapter title but the content is framed by the inauguration of Godey's *Ladies Book*, founded in 1828. Sara Evans's *Born for Liberty* makes the same leap, moving from the end of the Revolution to a new chapter that starts with the 1820s. In a similar fashion, the classroom readings book edited by Mary Beth Norton and Ruth M. Alexander, *Major Problems in American Women's History*, contains no articles centrally concerned with the 1800-1830 period. And only in the very latest edition of the Linda Kerber and Jane DeHart reader, *Women's America*, has an early-nineteenth-century essay just been added, a study of sexual coercion by Sharon Bloch.

Yet during those decades, the stage was being set for the more dramatic changes in women's lives so apparent by the mid nineteenth century. The engines of change were mostly processes, rarely attributable to individual persons or discrete events, which only makes it harder to distill them for textbook presentation or locate them on a timeline. For example, the novel argument for female education first broached in the 1790s eventually led to the founding of many hundreds of public and private schools admitting girls, with inaugural dates dotted throughout the next four decades. As a result, by the 1830s literacy for white females was at an all-time high. In the field of law, important but incremental changes in some dozen states' statute codes and in legal practice slowly built up during the early national period; by the 1830s new patterns were evident in areas like divorce and tort actions for seduction. Such a transition reveals new ways of thinking about women, sexuality, and autonomy, but the piecemeal nature of the legal process thwarts easy generalization. Likewise, a slow accumulation of alterations in men's employment patterns and the gradual incursion of a wage-based economy slowly but powerfully exerted pressure on the social definitions of women's non-waged work; but it is hard to put a finger on the moment in time when those definitions actually changed. Finally, perhaps most difficult of all to explain or even to get a handle on at the level of the individual (because of thin documentation), there occurred a slow but impressive and unmistakable decline in the birth rate in the years from 1800 to 1820, kicking off a century-long descent of momentous proportions both for women's history and for all of American history.

Taken together, these trends in education, law, work, and fertility indicate that the years of the early republic set in motion large-scale forces with profound consequences for women. As subterranean social processes, they can be challenging to teach, especially to first time history students. A discussion of some pathways by which scholars have been mapping out this shadowy territory can suggest approaches for integrating the topic into the classroom.

Some scholars concentrate on women and politics, pushing beyond the 1790s' conception of republican motherhood to larger questions of the meaning of female citizenship. Linda Kerber remains at the center of this enterprise with two recent books: *Toward an Intellectual History of Women and No Constitutional Right to be Ladies*. In the latter book, Kerber takes up the interesting question of the obligations of citizenship (rather than the privileges, such as voting), and she locates an 1805 lawsuit that wonderfully reveals contested notions of female citizenship in this transitional phase between republican motherhood and the cult of domesticity. The case involved the property rights of heirs of a loyalist wife who had fled America with her husband during the Revolutionary War. Was the wife a political traitor in her own right who therefore deserved to lose her dower property, confiscated by the state, or was she a mere *feme covert*, a legal nonperson obliged to accompany her husband? The judicial outcome was a clear victory for the common law of domestic relations: a wife could not presume to exercise political choice independent of her husband. One of the lawyers on the winning side elaborated: "If he commanded it [fleeing the country], she was bound to obey him, by a law paramount to all other laws—the law of God." The remarkable point, however, is that lawyers on the losing side were able even to frame and sustain the contrary argument—that women were political actors—up to the state supreme court.

Another teachable episode that reveals a sense of the possibilities for women opened by the Revolution—and then decidedly shut during the early republic—was the experience of suffrage in New Jersey. Between 1775 and 1807, the state constitution permitted all persons worth over fifty pounds to vote. Free blacks and single women were technically enfranchised under this provision, but not married women, who could have no independent claim to ownership of fifty pounds. Historians long regarded the provision as a fluke, a mistake by state law framers so certain of white male prerogative that they simply forgot to specify the sex and race of voters. But a recent article by Judith Apter Klinghoffer

and Lois Elkis argues that it was intentional, demonstrates that some women claimed the vote, and then explains its demise in the changing political climate of the early 1800s.

Rosemarie Zagarri is at work on a book on women and politics in the 1790s, and a foretaste of her research appears in a 1998 article, "The Rights of Man and Woman in Post-Revolutionary America." A particularly accessible and highly readable book for entry-level college students is Zagarri's brief biography of a remarkable woman of the late eighteenth century, *A Woman's Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution*. The book carries Warren into her final two decades in the new republic, and in the process it illuminates the cooling receptivity of the country to talented public women. Sheila Skemp has published a concise version of the life of Judith Sargent Murray in the Bedford Books series, examining the intellectual career of the most advanced American thinker on the question of women's common humanity with men. Murray's writings, signed with the pseudonyms "Constantia" and "The Gleaner," generated considerable interest and debate in the 1790s, but a series of personal affronts and hurtful criticism caused her to withdraw from print after 1798. By the time she died in 1820, her protofeminism was nearly forgotten. Taken together, Kerber, Zagarri, and Skemp show us a remarkable array of public expressions of women's claim to near equality with men that pepper the 1790s and then disappear. One question near the top of the research agenda is to explain what restrained and subdued those ideas in the first two decades of the nineteenth century.

The history of women and religion in the early republic shows a similar pattern of eighteenth-century opportunity followed by declension. By 1800 women made up the majority of Protestant congregants, while the church hierarchy remained exclusively male. Recent work by Susan Juster finds that in some New England Baptist congregations, remarkably egalitarian practices took hold during the mid eighteenth century, only to be deliberately scaled back by the 1810s. And Catherine Brekus has brought to light over a hundred women preachers and exhorters active in the years 1740-1845, whose lives signify a startling infringement of the traditional prohibition against female public speaking and the exercise of religious authority.

One such woman, Jemina Wilkinson of Rhode Island, transformed herself into a genderless religious leader called The Universal Friend. The Friend eschewed gendered pronouns, adopted ambiguous but mostly male-style clothes, and led a group of some 250 followers into a settlement called New Jerusalem in upstate New York in the 1790s. Such unusual assertions of female leadership came in for serious criticism. Religious periodicals in the early 1800s printed frequent reminders of the biblical prohibition, "Let your women learn to keep silence in the churches." Brekus finds that not a few of the female preachers she so painstakingly resurrected were literally erased from the official records of their churches. The religious history of the early republic's Second Great Awakening encapsulates two contradictory tendencies: a rising value on women's special piety and enthusiastic participation, coupled with an ever-louder chorus of admonitions about women's God-ordained subordination to men.

One way to approach the puzzle of the early nineteenth century is to try to decipher the thoughts, feelings, and ambitions of women themselves, through a close analysis of letters and diaries. Female literacy advanced early enough in New England for Nancy Cott to undertake an extensive study of hundreds of diaries and letter collections, forming the backbone of *The Bonds of Womanhood*. Cott sorted her material into the thematic subjects of work, domesticity, education, religion, and sisterhood. One surprising finding was that many of the central ideas about women's natural piety and submissive nature—later codified by the prescriptive cult of domesticity of the 1830s—can be delineated in young girls' diaries of the century's opening decades. Glorification of domesticity as expressed by women's literary periodicals and advice books thus cannot be written off as a plot to subdue and infantilize young women who might otherwise be unruly, impertinent, or dangerously confident; in some sense, it had its origins among the young women themselves well before the 1830s.

Another study that engages in close analysis of a woman's diary is Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's superb study of a Maine midwife, *A Midwife's Tale*. Ulrich explores the mental world and daily life of a taciturn but observant, dedicated woman and meticulously reconstructs Martha Ballard's medical practice and social networks, showing along the way the gendered household economy of the Maine frontier and the courtship and sexual practices of the day.

Young women in Ballard's town in the 1790s participated in the waning years of a somewhat looser system of sexual regulation; to be pregnant and then marry—the reverse of the usual order—was not that uncommon around New

England in the eighteenth century. Thirty-eight percent of the first births that Ballard delivered, in her career total of 814 deliveries, were to mothers who conceived before they were married. But in the early republic, prenuptial pregnancies began to plummet, and loss of virginity in women began to carry a terrible stigma. How such a sea change in courtship customs was inaugurated and enforced is one of the open and fascinating questions of the period of women's history. A partial look at the story in one town, Augusta, Maine—the same town Martha Ballard inhabited—is carried forward in my own book about a servant girl in Augusta, Helen Jewett, whose fall from virtue in the 1820s earned her the scorn of her employers and other townsfolk and directly set her on the path to a spectacular career in prostitution.

Ulrich's careful delineation of male and female work in Ballard's town shows us a social world where women's domestic labor intersected with men's and earned respect and value as a significant contribution to the household economy. Jeanne Boydston carries that story forward to the 1830s in *Home and Work*. Boydston presents a model analysis of how incremental changes in the nature of men's work slowly altered the value and sentiment attached to women's domestic labor. Boydston coined the phrase "the pastoralization of housework" to refer to the process by which housework lost its association with productive labor (in contrast to men's waged labor and market relations) and instead became sentimentalized as service provided as a feminine gift. Her book shows how behavior unchanged over time could mean very different things in separate eras. The housewife of 1780 and of 1820 faced much the same set of daily tasks, but the cultural meaning attached to housework had shifted and thereby rendered it invisible as work.

Finally, family law in the early republic remained mostly unchanged, with one important exception. Politicians in state after state framed new legal codes in light of republican theory and sentiment, but significantly failed to consider rewriting the rules on "Baron and Feme," as it was called, the ancient terms "lord and wife" indicating just how much reliance was placed on old legal customs that established wives as full dependents under husbands. The legal doctrine of feme covert, for example, remained in place as it had existed in English common law.

The one departure from English precedent was a significant one: state after state provided means for divorce. Norma Basch, in *Framing American Divorce*, locates the provision of divorce in the mix of Revolution-inspired legal change. Just as Americans had dissolved the bonds of empire with Britain in the Revolution, now the new states provided a way to dissolve the bonds of matrimony. Divorce was of course based on the finding of fault with one party, and it remained narrowly tied to specific offenses, but it was gender-neutral in its application and it was legally available in most states. In fact, not many couples resorted to legal divorce; the era of sharply rising divorce rates was at least another century away. But its availability and eclectic working in case after case under various state laws reveal much about the possibilities, tensions, and choices confronting women in the early republic.

The first forty years of the new nation were characterized by legal, economic, and cultural changes that shaped the lives of men and women throughout the rest of the nineteenth century. The nature of the changes does not lend itself to the simplified history captured in a timeline, and probably for good reason we have found it most efficient to teach this period first by describing the world of the republican mother and then leaping to the world of the 1830s, comparing two different ideal-typical models. Filling in the intervening ground is an exciting task, however, and one that can be shared in the classroom with students who are prepared to think about the amorphous and complex nature of cultural change. After all, many of these same kinds of long-term trends and processes undergird the significant influences in their own lives today, where ideas about the value of work, sexuality, family life, and the relative equality of the sexes are all still contested and in flux.

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