

The Impact of the American Revolution



In many ways, the American Revolution changed the course of history for the residents of what had been Britain's mainland North American colonies. In 1774, the settlers were colonials—subjects of a monarchy based thousands of miles across the Atlantic and participants in a traditional political system. Less than a decade later, these successful revolutionaries, now Americans, were the founders of an independent republic and the first colonists in history to win their freedom and establish their own nation.

Such dramatic events, it could be argued, impinged primarily on men, not women. After all, men alone fought in the armies, voted in the new republic's elections, drafted state and national constitutions, and served in legislative bodies. Women traditionally did not take part in formal politics; the public world was defined essentially as men's arena. Indeed, most of the earliest historians of women, those who lived and worked in the period between the late nineteenth century and the 1970s, ignored the Revolution because it seemed to have had little effect on America's female inhabitants. To point out the obvious, the postwar period brought no clear advances in women's rights or noticeable changes in women's daily lives. Yet did that mean that the struggle for independence had no impact at all on North American women? And did it have different effects on white, black, and Indian women? Those questions have recently attracted the attention of several historians.

DOCUMENTS

In March 1776, recognizing that the American colonies, which had already been at war with Britain for nearly a year, would soon declare independence, Abigail Adams wrote to her congressman husband John, in Philadelphia, reminding him to “remember the ladies” in the nation’s “new code of laws.” She thus initiated the first known exchange in American history on the subject of women’s rights. The Adamses’ comments on the matter, and her subsequent letter to her close friend Mercy Otis Warren, make up Document 1. Document 2 is a 1778 letter from merchants at Fort Niagara to Daniel Claus, a British officer, which describes the opinions and actions of the influential Iroquois matron

Molly Brant. The following year, in Document 3, Claus informs his superior, General Frederick Haldimand, of Molly Brant’s importance. Document 4 dates from 1780: after the Americans had suffered one of their worst defeats of the war at Charleston, South Carolina, a Pennsylvanian named Esther DeBerdt Reed published a broadside, “The Sentiments of an American Woman,” proposing a nationwide ladies association to contribute to the welfare of the troops. A laconic description of what happened to the slaves from Thomas Jefferson’s plantations who ran off to join the invading British forces in 1781 constitutes Document 5. In Document 6, dated many years after the Revolution, Sarah Osborn, who had traveled with her husband and the American army, recalls those experiences as she applies for a government pension in 1837.

1. Abigail Adams, John Adams, and Mercy Otis Warren Discuss “Remembering the Ladies,” 1776

Abigail Adams to John Adams

Braintree March 31 1776

I long to hear that you have declared an independancy—and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power in the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity. Men of Sense in all Ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your Sex. Regard us then as Beings placed by providence under your protection and in imitation of the Supream Being make use of that power only for our happiness.

John Adams to Abigail Adams

Ap. 14. 1776

As to Declarations of Independency, be patient. Read our Privateering Laws, and our Commercial Laws. What signifies a Word.

As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient—that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent—that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their

Adams Papers and Warren-Adams Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Mass. This document can also be found in L. H. Butterfield, et al., eds., *Adams Family Correspondence* (Harvard University Press, 1963) vol. 1.

Masters. But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerful than all the rest were grown discontented.—This is rather too coarse a Compliment but you are so saucy, I wont blot it out.

Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Altho they are in full Force, you know they are little more than Theory. We dare not exert our Power in its full Latitude. We are obliged to go fair, and softly, and in Practice you know We are the subjects. We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would compleatly subject Us to the Despotism of the Peticoat, I hope General Washington, and all our brave Heroes would fight. I am sure every good Politician would plot, as long as he would against Despotism, Empire, Monarchy, Aristocracy, Oligarchy, or Ochlocracy—A fine Story indeed. I begin to think the Ministry as deep as they are wicked. After stirring up Tories, Landjobbers, Trimmers, Bigots, Canadians, Indians, Negroes, Hanoverians, Hessians, Russians, Irish Roman Catholicicks, Scotch Renegadoes, at last they have stimulated the to demand new Priviledges and threaten to rebell.

Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren

Braintree April 27 1776

He is very sausy to me in return for a List of Female Grievances which I transmitted to him. I think I will get you to join me in a petition to Congress. I thought it was very probable our wise Statesmen would erect a New Government and form a new code of Laws. I ventured to speak a word in behalf of our Sex, who are rather hardly dealt with by the Laws of England which gives such unlimited power to the Husband to use his wife ill.

I requested that our Legislators would consider our case and as all Men of Delicacy and Sentiment are averse to Exercising the power they possess, yet as there is a natural propensity in Humane Nature to domination, I thought the most generous plan was to put it out of the power of the Arbitrary and tyranick to injure us with impunity by Establishing some Laws in our favour upon just and Liberal principals.

I believe I even threatned fomenting a Rebellion in case we were not considered, and assured him we would not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we had neither a voice, nor representation.

In return he tells me he cannot but Laugh at My Extrordnary Code of Laws. That he had heard their Struggle had loosned the bands of Government, that children and apprentices were dissabedient, that Schools and Colledges were grown turbulent, that Indians slighted their Guardians, and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But my Letter was the first intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerful than all the rest were grown discontented. This is rather too coarse a complement, he adds, but that I am so sausy he wont blot it out.

So I have help'd the Sex abundantly, but I will tell him I have only been making trial of the Disintresstedness of his Virtue, and when weigh'd in the balance have found it wanting.

It would be bad policy to grant us greater power say they since under all the disadvantages we Labour we have the assendancy over their Hearts

And charm by accepting, by submitting sway.

Abigail Adams to John Adams

B[raintre]e May 7 1776

I can not say that I think you very generous to the Ladies, for whilst you are proclaiming peace and good will to Men, Emancipating all nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power over Wives. But you must remember that Arbitrary power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken—and notwithstanding all your wise Laws and Maxims we have it in our power not only to free our selves but to subdue our Masters, and without violence throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet—

“Charm by accepting, by submitting sway
Yet have our Humour most when we obey.”

2. Taylor & Duffin Report Molly Brant's Opinions and Actions, 1778

Niagara, 26 Octobr. 1778

Sir

It is about Sixteen days ago since Mr. Taylor arriv'd here. Miss Molly [Brant] being then in the Indian Towns, we postponed writing to you untill her return, which was daily expected, but it was 10 days after before she arrived. The little Trunk was delivered to her immediately. Her brother Mr. Joseph Brant was about 35 Miles above *Aughquago* when she heard of him last. He has been on the Frontiers since the beginning of May last: trying to make his Way through to the British Army with a pretty Considerable Party of Whites (which joined him there) and Indians, and though he has destroyed a great part of these back Settlements: it is told of him that he & his Party has Shewn dispositions of Humanity to Women & Children & Persons not found in Arms. . . . Miss Molly says he has now thoughts of penetrating through to the Army at New York, with only three or four with him: as he finds it impracticable with the whole of his Party, which he does not think Strong enough to force their way, and with three, or four he may March by back Roads, & in the Night. Miss Molly however thinks the risk is too great, so Wishes, & is not without hopes; that he may come in here, & if he does She Imagines he will go down to Canada to see his Excellcy. General Haldimand, & you. . . .

We paid Miss Molly £25 Halifax Currey. agreeable to his Excellcy. General Haldimands desire to Mr. Taylor, when in Montreal this fall. She desires you will thank his Excellency for her, and if the Season was not so far spent She wou'd have gone down to Canada to thank him herself. She is mightily pleased with his Excllcy's notice of her. . . .

Miss Molly told Mr. Taylor that the Indians often ask her what is the reason that Colo. Claus did not come to Niagara. If it were not for the Service She thinks She

Taylor & Duffin to Daniel Claus, 26 October 1778, British Library, Add. MSS. 21774, ff. 9–10. This document can also be found in Maryly B. Penrose, comp. *Indian Affairs Papers: American Revolution* (Franklin Park, N.J.: Liberty Bell Associates, 1981), 167–168.