

WOMEN IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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BRAINSTORM

- ◉ What do students already know about women in the Revolution?
- ◉ What roles did women play?
- ◉ What is the forgotten history?



BUYING HABITS

- ◉ British responded to the colonists when their private sector of manufactured goods was at risk
- ◉ Great Britain repeals taxes after boycotts - not due to political ideals but due to \$\$
- ◉ But who actually was part of the boycott...?

WOMEN'S BUYING HABITS

- ◉ The boycott was clearly the idea of men but put into place through women's buying habits
- ◉ Women were traditionally seen as "morally incompetent" and were expected to stay out of politics and government
- ◉ Buying household goods now a political statement! Women are politicized!(Berkin 21)
- ◉ Radical departure



TEA

- ◉ Women's buying habits were now under scrutiny, no where more obvious than with tea
- ◉ Tea was a mark of gentility, the "drink of the day" - no water or coffee readily available
- ◉ Women had to make a choice not to buy it - making a statement to not serve it to guests (Berkin 24)

SPINNING BEES

- ◉ Women held all day spinning sessions to produce cloth that would replace what they were boycotting from Great Britain
- ◉ “Spinster” - came from older women who lived with relatives and did all the unpleasant work
- ◉ Spinning = awful
- ◉ Now, so called Daughters of Liberty are producing “Liberty Cloth” (Berkin 18-19)

A TRUE CIVIL WAR



- Families torn apart
 - Jonathan Sewell
 - John Hancock
 - Married sisters and then became Loyalist and Patriot respectively
 - Jonathan Sewell moved back to England with his wife (Berkin 93)

NO ROMANCE OF WAR

- This was a true home front war - there were no textiles, little food, homes were frequently invaded
 - Alcohol, preservatives, medicine all were scarce yet women were expected to supply it when men were injured and brought to them
 - “As to goods of any kind, we cannot tell what quantity there is. Only two or three Shops open. Goods at a most extravagant price -- all the better to promote Manufactures.” Abigail Adams (Letter 14 April 1776)
- Since most men were fighting, it was women who had to deal with the consequences

NO ROMANCE OF WAR



- Women would stand by the road and ladle out liquor when the army marched by
 - Not store bought of course!
 - Homemade with rye due to shortages
 - *Watch John Adams clip here!*

WOMEN SCARED

- Freeze to death
- Starve to death
- Homes ransacked by passing soldiers
- Many women were brutalized (Berkin 39)
 - Often farmers did not care one way or the other about the war - once women were injured or raped - men joined the Patriot side in droves



ABIGAIL AND JOHN

- ◉ **“I dare not express to you at 300 hundred miles distance how ardently I long for your return. I have some very miserly Wishes; and cannot consent to your spending one hour in Town till at least I have had you 12”**
- Abigail Adams to her husband (Letter 16 October 1774)
- Read primary source here!

NEW ROLE



- Women had previously just been asked to take care of the children in their “sphere”
 - Now women asked to manage the farm as well - for many women it was terrifying
 - For some gratifying as “your farm” became “our farm” which became “my farm” in letters to their husbands (Berkin 33)

NEW ROLE

- ◉ Abigail Adams - "Tis a fine growing Season having lately had a charming rain, which was much wanted as we had none before for a fortnight. Your meadow is almost fit to mow." (Letter 24 May 1775)

WOMEN ON THE BATTLEFIELD?

- ◉ Women often joined men on the field and lived with them
 - Washington hates it but cannot make women leave or men would leave too
 - Washington in 1777 - “the multitude of women in particular, especially those who are pregnant, or have children, are a clog upon every movement” (Rees 54)



WOMEN ON THE BATTLEFIELD

- ◉ Washer women" enlisted to clean clothes as disease had become a major problem and men were not battle ready
- ◉ Ratio varies from as many as 1 woman:8 men to as few as 1 woman : 44 men(Rees 52)
- ◉ "They provided some semblance of home life for the men...[which was] extremely important considering that the War for Independence continued for eight years and soldiers fought tedium more often than they did the enemy." (Rees 52)

WOMEN ON THE BATTLEFIELD

- ◉ Molly Pitchers - not a real woman (Berkin xi)
 - Nick name for women who went into the forts and used water to cool the cannon so it could be reloaded
 - Often if men fell in battle, women would resume their duties and fire the cannons



WOMEN'S PROVISIONS

- ◉ Women received the same provisions as men (except whiskey)
- ◉ Washington forced to do this or risk "loose by Desertion, perhaps to the Enemy, some of the oldest and best Soldiers in the Service" (Rees 56)

UNKNOWN NUMBERS

- It is hard to determine how many women lived on the battlefield or enlisted as soldiers in secret
 - If a women was following her husband or boyfriend on the march - just sent home
 - If a women was discovered posing as a man she would be flogged and called a “whore”
 - Deborah Sampson - fought for 3 years - successfully claimed benefits after the war (Berkin 61)

WHAT DID WOMEN GET?

- ◉ No political rights
- ◉ Not out of their “sphere”
- ◉ No control over finances after marriage

- ◉ Anything?



WHAT DID WOMEN GET?

- ◉ Until American Revolution women had no place in the education of children (Berkin 151)
 - Enlightenment ideals
 - Role in the Revolution
 - = “Republican Motherhood” - mothers now need to raise and educate children to be patriotic and moral (Berkin 153)

WHAT DID WOMEN GET?

- ◉ Role shifts from wife to mother - isolates them within the home but gives more responsibility
- ◉ Women need an education to be teachers - many schools open that teach the same curriculum to girls as boys (Berkin 154)
- ◉ The idea that women are naturally nurturing is a socially constructed ideal from this era

WORKS CITED

- ◉ Berkin, Carol. *Revolutionary Mothers Women in the Struggle for America's Independence*. New York: Vintage, 2006.
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- ◉ Rees, John U. "'The Proportion of Women Which Ought to Be Allowed...': An Overview of Continental Army Female Camp Followers." *The Continental Soldier* VIII.3 (1995): 51-58.
- ◉ All images taken from Google Search "Women in the American Revolution" - various unofficial sites.