

Women of the American Revolution

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Women of the American Revolution

A Unit of Study for Grades 5–8

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Cover Illustration: "Detail of a woodcut illustration from 'A New Touch on the Times. Well adapted to the distressing situation of every seaport town.' By a Daughter of Liberty, living in Marblehead." Broadside, 1779. Courtesy of the New-York Historical Society, N.Y.C.

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Acknowledgments

Jim Pearson is an elementary school teacher in Santa Barbara, California. He developed this unit with Supervising Historian Gary B. Nash while he was a graduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles. Tom Ingersoll served as the Unit Editor.

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INTRODUCTION

APPROACH AND RATIONALE

Women of the American Revolution is one of over sixty teaching units published by the National Center for History in the Schools that are the fruits of collaborations between history professors and experienced teachers of both United States and World History. The units represent specific issues and dramatic episodes in history from which you and your students can pause to delve into the deeper meanings of these selected landmark events and explore their wider context in the great historical narrative. By studying crucial turningpoints in history, the student becomes aware that choices had to be made by real human beings, that those decisions were the result of specific factors, and that they set in motion a series of historical consequences. We have selected issues and dramatic moments that best bring alive that decision-making process. We hope that through this approach, your students will realize that history is an ongoing, open-ended process, and that the decisions they make today create the conditions of tomorrow's history.

Our teaching units are based on primary sources, taken from government documents, artifacts, journals, diaries, newspapers, magazines, literature, contemporary photographs, paintings, and other art from the period under study. What we hope to achieve using primary source documents in these lessons is to remove the distance that students feel from historical events and to connect them more intimately with the past. In this way we hope to recreate for your students a sense of "being there," a sense of seeing history through the eyes of the very people who were making decisions. This will help your students develop historical empathy, to realize that history is not an impersonal process divorced from real people like themselves. At the same time, by analyzing primary sources, students will actually practice the historian's craft, discovering for themselves how to analyze evidence, establish a valid interpretation and construct a coherent narrative in which all the relevant factors play a part.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Within this unit, you will find: Teaching Background Materials, including Unit Overview, Unit Context, Correlation to the National Standards for History, Unit Objectives, and Introduction to *Women of the American Revolution*; A Dramatic Moment; and Lesson Plans with Student Resources. This unit, as we have said above, focuses on certain key moments in time and should be used as a supplement to your customary course materials. Although these lessons are recommended for use by grades 5–8, they can be adapted for other grade levels.

Introduction

The Teacher Background section should provide you with a good overview of the entire unit and with the historical information and context necessary to link the **Dramatic Moment** (written by author Jim Pearson) to the larger historical narrative. You may consult it for your own use, and you may choose to share it with students if they are of a sufficient grade level to understand the materials.

The Lesson Plans include a variety of ideas and approaches for the teacher which can be elaborated upon or cut as you see the need. These lesson plans contain student resources which accompany each lesson. The resources consist of primary source documents, any handouts or student background materials, and a bibliography.

In our series of teaching units, each collection can be taught in several ways. You can teach all of the lessons offered on any given topic, or you can select and adapt the ones that best support your particular course needs. We have not attempted to be comprehensive or prescriptive in our offerings, but rather to give you an array of enticing possibilities for in-depth study, at varying grade levels. We hope that you will find the lesson plans exciting and stimulating for your classes. We also hope that your students will never again see history as a boring sweep of facts and meaningless dates but rather as an endless treasure of real life stories and an exercise in analysis and reconstruction.

TEACHER BACKGROUND

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

Relying on primary sources, this unit introduces students to the American Revolution. The lessons divide the conflict into three periods: the friction leading to the war, the struggle for independence, and the expectations that shaped people's participation. The feature which distinguishes this treatment of the Revolution from other lessons is a focus on the conflict from the perspective of women.

The importance of women in the development of American society is only now beginning to be fully recognized. Although women have always comprised more than half of the population, their presence in recorded history has been marginal. Until recent decades, most historians focused their interest on political, military, or commercial leaders. With few exceptions, women had traditionally been excluded from these careers of public power. However, the study of history has changed dramatically in the last generation. Historians have come to recognize the important roles that ordinary people, male and female, have had in shaping our nation. A more inclusive picture of the past which considers the contributions of people previously neglected in historical writing not only more accurately describes the past, but will help students appreciate that they too have a role in history's pageant. Moreover, an accurate account of the past can partially explain some of the enduring social inequalities which are the consequence of culture, not biology. Seeing the gradual transformation of social values and practices can give students both a sense of their capacity to influence their community and an appreciation of how their community, in turn, shapes them.

The focus on women, while intended in part as a corrective for the general neglect of women in history, is more than a gesture. During the Revolutionary Era women comprised half of colonial society. Their contributions were crucial to the final victory. Although most women were noncombatants, they were subjected to the consequences of war, including suffering, violence, and death.

II. UNIT CONTEXT

This unit should be taught after studying the late colonial period and prior to examining the Constitution and early republic. While this unit is designed to be an adequate introduction to the Revolution, some teachers will want to treat the nation's founding in greater depth. This unit could therefore complement more traditional treatments of the Revolution. The first lesson can be used to introduce a more extended examination of the causes of the Revolution. The second lesson can be taught in conjunction with lessons on the campaigns and battles. The last two lessons can be used to discuss the legacy of the Revolution. Students can consider how far the Revolution succeeded in achieving its goals.

III. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL HISTORY STANDARDS

Women of the American Revolution provides teaching materials that address *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), **Era 3**, “Revolution and the New Nation (1754–1820s).” Lessons specifically address **Standard 2C**, which calls for an analysis of the ideas put forth arguing for women’s roles and rights during the revolutionary era.

Lessons within this unit likewise address a number of specific **Historical Thinking Standards** including: “Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative and assess its credibility” (**Standard 2**); “Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas and values” (**Standard 3**); “Identify gaps in the available records and marshal contextual knowledge and perspectives of time and place to elaborate on the evidence” (**Standard 4**); and “Identify issues and problems in the past” (**Standard 5**).

III. OBJECTIVES

1. To understand that women not only comprised half the population of Revolutionary America, but were instrumental in achieving victory.
2. To explore the growing resistance in colonial America to England’s rule.
3. To appreciate that wars require enormous sacrifice by everyone involved, not just soldiers.
4. To learn that while some people fought for the independence of the colonies, others joined the struggle in the hope of creating a new, more democratic society.
5. To speculate on the surprising consequences of human actions by considering some of the unintended effects of the Revolution on the social role of women.

IV. INTRODUCTION TO *American Women of the Revolution*

Eighteenth-Century Colonial Women

Options for women in eighteenth-century colonial society were far more restricted than they are today. Although women's roles may seem familiar to students, two hundred years ago these familiar tasks were very different. Colonial women were supposed to be loyal helpmates to their husbands. Since the only status a woman could expect to achieve was through the man she married, nearly all colonial women married. Once married, women ceased to have any legally independent existence; under English common law they were *femes covert*, which meant that husbands were protectors as well as absolute masters. With no legally independent existence, a woman's social existence was largely defined by the position of her husband. Even a woman's property and wages accrued to the husband after marriage. Women moved through the world under the control of men—from father to husband. This system kept women from gaining autonomy. The general conviction that only economically independent people were capable of exercising the freedom of choice necessary to take a responsible role in the public arena of politics and commerce left women confined to a domestic sphere, relying on the males of their families to represent their needs. Consequently, women were locked in a system of social dependence from which there was only occasional escape.

While women were allowed only a limited public role, they were neither passive nor unimportant. Eighteenth-century women ran households and raised children. Being a good wife required an array of skills that are no longer associated with household management. In addition to cooking and cleaning, women butchered fowl they had raised, smoked meat, made cheese from the milk they had taken from the cow, sewed clothes from the cloth they had spun, made soap, and preserved vegetables they had grown. Moreover, limited technology meant that many of these chores, like laundry, were back-wrenching, tiresome, all-day jobs involving heavy hauling and firm muscles. Other jobs, like sewing, required dexterity. Usually barred by social conventions from prominent roles in commerce, women were still expected to manage the household economy.

The social significance of women became increasingly apparent to both men and women as the colonies struggled to secure their independence. During the Revolution, some skills regarded as feminine, like spinning, became more widely appreciated. The war also gave some women the opportunity to demonstrate their capacity to assume responsibilities regarded as male. For instance, many women took charge of family farms, carrying out every task from planning what, when, and how much to plant, to marketing the surplus harvest. Historians have noted that during the war, in their letters to husbands, women often changed from writing "your farm" to "our farm." This seemingly

Teacher Background Materials

trivial linguistic transition marks an important shift in thinking. The Revolutionary War did not substantially change the material lives of most women; the battle for equality would be taken up by their daughters and granddaughters. But while the women's roles may actually have become more narrowly and rigidly defined after the Revolution, women's status improved. Women's intelligence and capacities were grudgingly acknowledged. Women came to have more choice in marriage; the importance of motherhood was recognized, and opportunities for education improved.

The Revolutionary War

The part of the Revolution with which everyone is familiar was the struggle for independence. Less familiar was the struggle within America to redefine social roles and the nature and structure of society. The ethnically diverse, heterogeneous, patriotic population of the Revolutionary period was unified only in its determination to beat the British. Wealthier, better established Americans often fought for conservative reasons. They wanted to preserve their traditional rights as Englishmen, which they believed were being subverted by a corrupt British empire. The poorer folk joined the Revolution in the hope of improving their station. Many of the regulars in Washington's army had joined for cash bounties and the promise of land. Other poor people saw the war as an opportunity to realign social arrangements, forever casting off habits of deference which had been conspicuous aspects of hierarchical pre-Revolutionary America. Women joined the struggle for similarly diverse reasons. As traditional helpmates to their well-heeled husbands, some wanted to provide support and preserve the status quo being threatened by imperial England. Others sought to make their society freer, more open and fluid, thereby improving the diversity of options available to women. Still others may simply have seized the opportunity to take more public, active and respected roles in areas of society traditionally barred to them. Thus, beyond achieving national independence and formulating the political philosophy, of the new nation, the revolution also called into question long established social and political relationships and demarcated an agenda for reform that would preoccupy Americans down to the present day.

V. LESSON PLANS

1. Daughters of Liberty
2. Women in the Revolution
3. Remember the Ladies
4. Republican Mothers

Dramatic Moment Boston Women Protest

On a warm Boston afternoon in July 1777, Thomas Boylston stood at the door of his warehouse staring grimly at the crowd of determined women filling the street. Some gripped wheelbarrows or stood beside carts, others wearing fine silk held umbrellas against the afternoon sun. Most were women in clean homespun, plain but neat. Squarely in front stood Mrs. Colter, who when the crowd became silent said politely but firmly, "We know you have coffee Mr. Boylston. Give it over to us at the Committee's price and we'll be pleased to pay."

"On your way. You'll not be having my coffee at such prices. It's mine bought and paid for. Who's this so called Committee of Patriots to be telling me what I can and cannot sell and for how much? My business is trade—buying and selling. The goods are mine. There's plenty of folks with no stomach for war, but possessing a taste for coffee and the silver to satisfy it."

"Mr. Boylston, the only hope for us is sharing. The soldiers need theirs and we need ours. There being so little going around, surely we must all look to help each other. We won't have you bleeding and squeezing decent folks. Give us the keys and we'll divide the goods fairly and pay what's right."

Trembling with fear and rage, Boylston edged back through the door. But a large framed woman standing next to Mrs. Colter saw this movement. Before he could slam the door, she stepped forward, seized him by his collar, and heaved the little man into a cart. Boylston's eyes got round as saucers and nearly popped from his head; he opened and closed his mouth like a fish, not making a sound; sweat glistened on his face. Lying on his back staring up from the cart, Boylston found himself surrounded by a ring of women glaring down at him.

Slowly he reached into his vest and drew out his keys. As Mrs. Colter took them, someone tipped the cart, dumping Boylston into the street. Boylston scrambled through the crowd. His retreating backside made an irresistible target for the slaps and kicks of women long tired of his arrogance and greed. The rest of the women swept into the warehouse, found the hidden coffee, di-

Dramatic Moment

vided it into the carts, and left. Throughout this spectacle men stood at the edge of the crowd. Many smiled at Boylston's fate, but they kept quiet. Clearly, the women were not inclined to be teased, and the watching men were not quite sure they should be cheered. The war had changed Boston, but crowds of unaccompanied women taking public action was not a sight most men welcomed. Men depended on the support of women, but did not want them to forget their "proper" roles as wives and mothers.

LESSON ONE

DAUGHTERS OF LIBERTY

A. OBJECTIVES

- ◆ To learn the role colonial women played in the turmoil that preceded the Revolution.
- ◆ To understand some of the causes that led to the Revolution.
- ◆ To practice interpreting documents which reflect various points of view.

B. LESSON ACTIVITIES

1. Ask students to explain what they know about the Revolutionary War. See if anyone knows the causes of the war and why America wanted to be independent. Students may respond with generalities, like “to be free,” but will probably not know much. Tell them that they are going to study the Revolutionary War. This lesson will focus on the growing hostility between England and its American colonies by examining the role taken by colonial women during this period.

Teacher Background for Activity #1:

Before students can understand the causes of the Revolution, they need to understand some background information. Students must know the meanings of “colony,” “tax,” and “boycott.” Americans were colonists who thought of themselves as English. As English citizens, they thought they were entitled to decide their own taxes. England and its American colonies had just fought a seven year war against France and its colony, Canada. When England and its American colonies won the war, Canada became another colony of England. The war cost England an enormous amount of money. After the war, Britain left thousands of English soldiers in the colonies to guard the western frontier and keep order in the colonies. The English government, Parliament, wanted to raise American taxes and make the colonists provide food and housing for the soldiers. Most American colonists felt they had already done enough to help England. They also believed that their own

Lesson One

colonial governments should set the taxes, rather than the distant English Parliament where they had no representation. England decided to tax goods most often imported into the colonies, like sugar, glass, and tea.

2. Once students understand the source of the conflict, ask them to imagine what the colonists decided to do about these taxes. How could people living in colonial America avoid paying them? Tell students they are going to read some documents that historians use to study the colonists' responses to England's attempt to tighten control over the colonies.
3. Pass out **Document A1**, "Patriotic Poesy," a poem copied into the commonplace book of Milcah Martha Moore in 1768; or **A2**, a modern version of the poem. Have the class read the poem. In **Document A1** several key words are underlined and explained in the right column to guide students reading the original version of the poem.
 - a. Students should understand the document's main idea, that the poem is calling on women to boycott taxable imports.
 - b. Ask them to assume the role of historians and discuss what this poem reveals about colonial life in 1768.

A Note to the Teacher:

Appealing to women on the basis of public political responsibility is the most startling feature of this poem. Until recently, historians felt that because women were not allowed to vote and their social role was largely restricted to the home, people of the eighteenth century did not recognize the political significance of women. Indeed, when women were asked for help, the pleas were usually appeals to their sense of duty as wives and mothers. During the Revolution requests for women's help were still typically based on women's domestic nature. But this document shows a recognition that women were capable of public and political behavior. This new appreciation of women's capacities would propel women of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to demand their rights as citizens.

- c. If students have difficulty in understanding the poem's significance, prompt them with the following questions:
 - How are women described?

- Are women described as mothers or wives?
 - What are women being asked to do?
 - Why are they being asked to do it?
 - In this poem, how are women and men compared?
 - Who is Grenville?
 - What does the poem's author hope will happen to merchants?
4. When students understand the significance of this document, have them read **Document B**, a "Revolutionary Broadside" published in January, 1770 in Boston. They should note that it is addressed to the Sons and Daughters of Liberty.'
- a. Ask the students the purpose of this document. If they do not make the analogy between this document and a billboard, lead them to this insight. They should understand that this is a public appeal to stop shopping at William Jackson's store.
 - b. Ask them to speculate on the reason William Jackson was the target for this boycott notice. They should also consider why women were so important to the boycott of taxable items. Be sure students understand that the organizers of the boycott knew that success depended on securing the support of shoppers, who were predominantly women.
 - c. Try to get them to appreciate the way this plea is almost like a curse on anyone who chooses not to obey. What does that suggest about the way patriots felt about those who were not actively on their side?
5. Pass out **Document C**, Philip Dawes's "A Society of Patriotic Ladies." To fully understand the picture, be sure students read the copy of the manuscript that the women are writing.
- a. Without telling them that Dawes was an English caricaturist, have students speculate about Dawes's attitude toward women who become active in politics.
 - b. Have them describe the appearance of the women and the

Lesson One

various things that are happening. Students should understand that the women are in the midst of writing a petition. The picture is based on the women of Edenton, North Carolina, who in 1774 actually drew up, circulated, and signed such a petition. Signing a petition was a conscious and collective political act, never before associated with women. Thus, this action was a dramatic departure from the past and would not be repeated with any regularity until the nineteenth century.

- c. Students might be asked to reflect on the courage and conviction required of people who, like the women of Edenton, are willing to violate powerful social conventions for the sake of ideals. How should society treat such people?

A Note to the Teacher:

Dawes seems more concerned that women are involved in politics, than with their brand of politics. Students should recognize that the women in the picture are depicted as foolish or ugly. The women in the background with long faces and sharp features are probably spinsters, women then regarded as misfits. The cartoon also reveals something of the arrogance and contempt certain sectors of the English population had for Americans. This sense of superiority was a continual irritant for colonists.

C. Concluding Activity

- a. Have students draw cartoons representing the Daughters of Liberty from the perspective of American patriots. They might be drawn holding symbols like flags, torches, swords, or other symbols of wisdom, strength, and courage.
- b. If students would prefer drawing a caricature, have them draw, from the perspective of a patriot or from the perspective of a merchant who continues to stock British made goods. They could draw the British Prime Minister George Grenville bleeding the colonies or King George III being led astray by corrupt ministers.

“Patriotic Poesy”

(Primary Source)

Copied by Milcah Martha Moore of Philadelphia
into her commonplace book in 1768.

<p><i>Since the Men from a Party, on fear of a Frown, Are kept by a <u>Sugar-Plumb</u>*, quietly down, <u>Supinely</u>* asleep, and depriv'd of their Sight Are strip'd of their Freedom, and rob'd of their Right. If the Sons (so <u>degenerate</u>*) <u>the Blessing despise</u>*, Let the Daughters of Liberty, nobly arise, And tho' we've <u>no Voice</u>*, but a negative here, The use of the <u>Taxables</u>*, let us <u>forbear</u>*, (Then Merchants import till yr. Stores are all full May the Buyers be few and yr. <u>Traffick be dull</u>*) <u>Stand firmly resolved</u>* and <u>bid Grenville</u>* to see That rather than Freedom, we'll part with our Tea And well as we love the <u>Draught</u>* when adry, As American Patriots, —our Taste we deny.</i></p>	<p>* Candy used as a bribe</p> <p>* Flat on their back</p> <p>* Immoral</p> <p>* hate liberty</p> <p>* Women could not vote</p> <p>* Imports</p> <p>* stop using</p> <p>* Customers be unwilling</p> <p>* Decide</p> <p>* tell Prime Minister</p> <p>* Drink</p>
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Modern Version of “Patriotic Poesy”

Colonial men are so easily scared of England’s disapproval that a piece of candy will keep them quiet.

They will lie down and sleep, giving up their ability to see, their freedom, and their rights.

If the Sons of Liberty have sunk to such an immoral condition that they hate the blessing of liberty, then let the Daughters of Liberty rise and take their place.

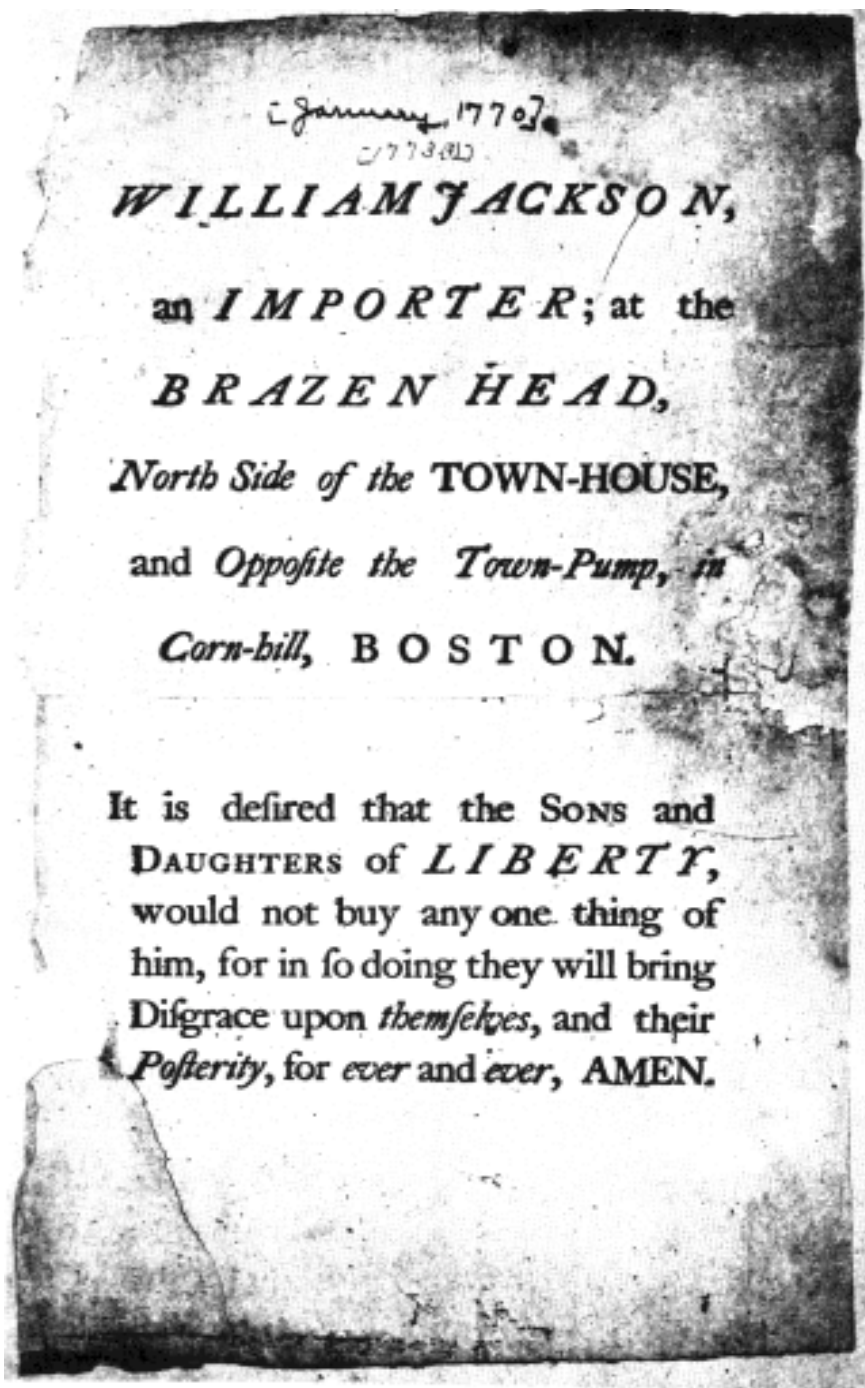
Although women cannot vote or petition, we can do something—stop buying taxable imported goods.

(I hope merchants keep importing goods until their stores are full, and that no one buys anything.)

Be determined and tell Prime Minister Grenville that we will give up tea but not our freedom.

Even though we love to drink tea, when we are thirsty, as American patriots—we won’t.

A Revolutionary Broadside, 1770.



The Library of Congress Prints Division, Washington D.C.

Philip Dawes' "A Society of Patriotic Ladies," 1775

The petition the ladies in the cartoon are signing says:

"We the Ladys of Edenton do hereby solemnly Engage not to Conform to that Pernicious Custom of Drinking Tea, or that we the above said Ladys will not promote ye wear of any Manufacture from England untill such time that all Acts which tend to Enslave this our Native Country shall be Repealed."



The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
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