

Saving Washington: Background Essay

Module 1 Unofficial Politician: Dolley Madison in Early Washington

WOMEN DURING THE REVOLUTION

The traditional story of America's origins focuses almost entirely on the Founding Fathers and the men who fought the battles, a well-known narrative that discounts the real contributions of women. Throughout the founding era, women's rights and roles were restricted by coverture, the ancient English common law that placed females under the control of fathers and husbands. It made them largely invisible in the law, and its wide shadow made them largely invisible in history. But women were present, and deeply involved in the political events around them.

During the Revolution, some women aligned with the British. For wealthy women, the reason may have been that they were invested in trade and knew that a war would disrupt the economy. Runaway slaves, including some who belonged to George Washington, were drawn to the



Johannes Adam Simon Oertel, *Pulling Down the Statue of King George III*, New York City, 1852–1853. Oil on canvas. New-York Historical Society, Gift of Samuel V. Hoffman, 1925.6.

British side by the promise of freedom. On the Patriot side, women found inventive ways to aid the drive toward independence. Even before the war broke out, women were boycotting British imports like tea and fabric, two products deeply ingrained in women's lives. When the statue of King George was pulled down in New York after the reading of the Declaration of Independence, women and children in Connecticut received the broken statue, melted the metal, and made bullets. And when a signal was hung in the Old North Church

to send Paul Revere on his famous ride, the secret information about enemy troop movements had probably come from Margaret Kemble Gage, the American-born wife of Britain's top general, Thomas Gage. He banished her to England.

As the war continued, women served as behind-the-scenes political agents, and a small number fought alongside male soldiers. Some followed their husbands and supported the war effort by cooking, mending, and caring for the wounded. The



John Singleton Copley, *Mrs. James Warren (Mercy Otis)*, ca. 1763. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of Winslow Warren, 31.212.

THE POST- REVOLUTION ROLE OF WOMEN

When the war ended, the lingering revolutionary spirit opened a window, allowing women to join the high-stakes conversation about America's future. A few were able to speak and

write openly about politics, which had not been acceptable previously. Revolutionary Army was only possible because of female labor performing these crucial survival duties. Other women remained at home and managed farms and businesses alone. Housewives continued to boycott British goods, turning their buying habits into powerful political tools. When protestors took to the streets, women stood with their fists and voices raised.

Mercy Otis Warren, who had published anti-British satire during the war, was the best known of these "female politicians." She wrote against the ratification of the Constitution, equating Federalism with "aristocratic tyranny," and later produced a three-volume history of the Revolution.

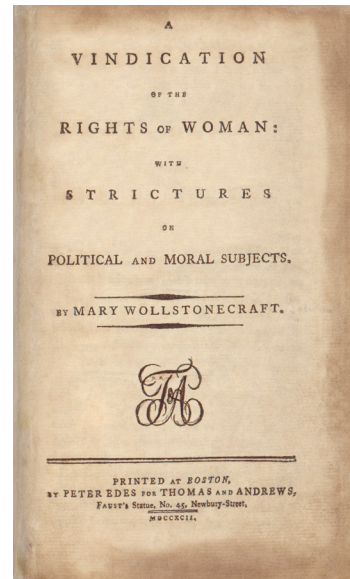
By the early 1800s, this window of opportunity had closed. Women were encouraged to resume traditional female roles, but with an important new twist. In order for

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the republic to thrive, the nation needed a citizenry that understood and was committed to American ideals. Women were uniquely placed, and uniquely qualified, to reinforce these values in their husbands and children. Scholars call this idea republican womanhood. It gave many women a new sense of purpose and a personal connection to the country's future. Educational opportunities for women improved, to better prepare them for this role. Literacy rates increased among white, mostly Northern urban women who had the resources to pursue an education.

Regardless of race or class, women participated in political life. They remained engaged through reading and discussion. They took part in petition campaigns, to help war widows, for example. To support early anti-slavery efforts, they formed church groups, and joined boycotts of slave-produced crops like sugar and cotton. And they considered the role of women by reading revolutionary new works on the subject, like Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* and Judith Sargent Murray's essay, "On the Equality of the Sexes."

Even as coverture limited rights, the Enlightenment had changed



Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1794, title page. New-York Historical Society Library, Y1794 Woll Vin.

some attitudes about women. They were increasingly thought to have special strengths that men lacked, especially in relation to morality, religion, and social behavior. At a 1790 Independence Day celebration, one speaker cast these strengths in a new, more political, light: "The men possess the more ostensible powers of making and executing laws . . . [but] 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."

The speaker, James Tilton, was addressing a group of former soldiers, and used "manners," as it was understood at the time. Historian Rosemarie Zagari notes that the word "connoted ideas of individual morality and personal character, suggesting a strong connection between private values and public behavior. . . . [It] implied something more profound than the way a person held his or her teacup."

Republican womanhood directed women's energies toward their husbands and children. But the belief that women were responsible for the nation's moral fiber applied more broadly as well. It meant new responsibilities and new openings for women, as Dolley Madison's life and work would show.

DOLLEY MADISON

In 1801, James Madison was appointed secretary of state by the recently elected president, Thomas Jefferson. It was a harshly partisan time in the still-unfinished capital city. Little social life existed where congressmen might have relaxed together, or begun to get along. Most came to Washington only to work, leaving families at home as they crammed into uncomfort-



Joseph Wood, *Dolley (Payne) Todd Madison*, 1817. Oil on canvas. Virginia Historical Society, 1967.14.

able boarding houses. Political disagreements festered and grew. Some legislators refused to speak to others. A few resorted to physical blows, even duels.

When President Thomas Jefferson invited politicians to dinner at the White House (then called the President's Palace or President's House), he invited one side at a time, never both at once. In this way he avoided partisan conflict, and strengthened his own hand by preventing factions from working together. This approach made partisanship worse, and Dolley Madison took a different tack. She saw the importance of social

contact, and she entertained often and happily. A woman who never forgot a name, who dressed for elegance and effect, and who enjoyed sharing a pinch of snuff with her guests, Dolley never seemed to behave in an overtly political way. She was far more politically astute than people realized, but her skills would have been seen as indelicate and unwomanly. Dolley kept them well hidden behind a warm smile and a beautiful dress. But she understood politics, knew what the issues were, and who should talk to whom. Her parties were an opportunity for her to put this knowledge to work.

Battles might rage in Congress, but at the Madisons' gatherings—held in their home during the secretary of state years, and later in the White House—guests obeyed the rules of social life, which required good etiquette and good character. In this setting, with women present, men behaved as gentlemen and even enemies began to converse. These events offered politicians a regular, friendly environment in which to both socialize and work, to find points of agreement, and to bring the Constitution to life "on the ground."

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Module 2 Breaking the Rules: Women Reformers, 1800–1860

GOOD FEELINGS

As the United States entered the 1820s, earlier anxiety over the republic’s survival chances began to calm. The Constitution had remained effective. Power transferred from one president to the next without violence. The country was at peace. One Boston newspaper called it the Era of Good Feelings. The label overlooked the existence of slavery, entrenched inequalities,

and the hard reality of many people’s lives, but it captured a certain optimism in and about America.

The United States was stable, but it was changing rapidly as the economy began to diversify. Throughout America’s colonial history, most families had lived on farms that required the labor of the entire family. Men did one kind of work, and women another, but both were essential because nearly everything the family needed was grown or produced on the farm. By 1800, the nation was moving away from this farm-based economy. Industrialism was in its early stages, but many goods were being manufactured in factories. The factory sys-

tem required centralized networks of financing and transportation, which led to the expansion of cities. The cities, and the employment opportunities they presented, gave rise to something America had not yet seen: a middle class. Men in this new economic stratum, which was largely Protestant and white, worked outside the home and generally earned enough to support a family. Typically, the middle-class wives of these working men remained at home.

All of these story lines profoundly affected women’s lives, and women in turn profoundly affected the narrative of nineteenth-century America.

TRUE WOMANHOOD

With their husbands working outside the home, and without the farm-wife duties that filled the days of their mothers and grandmothers, the “proper role” of middle-class white women was redefined in the prescriptive literature written for them. New messages appeared in conduct books, ladies’ magazines, religious tracts, and similar publications. Sometimes written by men and sometimes by women, they carried the weight of authority, and defined how middle-class white women should



“Godey’s Paris Fashions Americanized,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, July 1848. Hand-colored engraving. New-York Historical Society Library, TX1.G58, vol. 37.

behave and look and occupy their time. In 1966, historian Barbara Welter surveyed a broad sampling of this literature for the years 1820–1860, and identified the virtues that characterized the newly idealized woman: purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity. Welter called it the cult of true womanhood. Other historians have used different terms—including the cult of domesticity, or simply domesticity—to define this pervasive new view of the exemplary woman.

The earlier ideal of republican womanhood, in which women were charged with the patriotic duty to maintain the ideals of the nation’s founding, seemed less critical when the U.S. was steady on its feet. Instead, “true women” focused on home, family, and religion, and they raised their sons to be successful in business. The idea of women’s sphere was not new, but it gained prominence and a starker outline. As the pace of American life quickened, the idea of a sanctuary from the jarring marketplace easily took root. Home was romanticized as a haven, and the woman of the house was romanticized as its caretaker and protector. Beneath the often sentimental language and imagery, women were portrayed as fundamentally different from, and inferior to, men. The legal principle of coverture, which limited the legal rights of married women, continued to cast its long shadow over cultural attitudes that affected all women’s lives.

It’s impossible to know how individual middle-class white women responded to the many directives that poured their way. Messages sent are not always messages welcomed or acted on. But many women were in



Francis Guy, *Tontine Coffee House*, New York City, ca. 1797. Oil on linen. New-York Historical Society, Purchase, The Louis Durr Fund, 1907.32.

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no position even to try to meet these expectations: poor working women, old women, black women, Native American women, women whose husbands had died or abandoned them or become ill or lost a job, single women “taken in” by a brother, widows left with young children. In fact, the vast majority of women were excluded from the true womanhood message. It was aimed at women who lived in cities or towns, whose husbands worked in banks and offices. Despite these women’s rising numbers, most women at the time still lived on farms.

Nevertheless, the cult of true womanhood was appealing to American women, even those with no chance of living a private, domestic life. It may appear today to have been quite rigid in its expectations, but part of its power was its flexibility. Even a poor house wife or mill girl could find a way to bring a small touch of gentility into her life, and feel that she was participating.

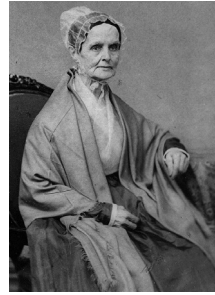
REFORMERS

In the Second Great Awakening (1790s–1840s), itinerant preachers traveled the countryside and converted thousands, especially



Jarena Lee, 1849. *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee: giving an account of her call to preach the gospel*, frontispiece. Engraving. New-York Historical Society Library, C1LA784 A3 1849.

to the Baptist and Methodist denominations. Most of the people in the crowds were women, and most of the men were their husbands and sons. The intense religious experience reinforced women’s sense of their moral superiority, and strengthened their commitment to put it to good use. This “moral superiority” marked a complete turnaround from the ideology of the colonial period, when women were seen as morally shaky, requiring a firm male hand to stay on the right path. In the new thinking that developed during the Awakening, women were both more spiritual than men, and naturally more inclined to see and do the right thing. They were also seen as more emotional, and therefore more susceptible to grace. As a result, women were considered responsible for setting moral and ethical standards within their homes and communities. And out of this new sense of women’s strength and



Lucretia Mott, ca. 1860–1880. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., 9750024.

obligation came their significant role in the great reform movements of the nineteenth century.

The Society of Friends, also known as Quakers, was a somewhat different case. Quakers were not deeply involved in the Second Great Awakening, but schisms within their faith produced some communities that were fully committed to social reform. Quaker doctrine granted women more power than their counterparts in many Protestant churches; they were elders and ministers, and involved in decision-making. Because of their organizational experience, and their religion’s focus on social good, Quaker women were both leaders and foot soldiers in a wide range of reform activities: temperance, pacifism, prison reform, Indian rights, co-education, abolition, and women’s rights.

Women’s earliest organized reform efforts were community-based and non-confrontational. Benevolent societies that began to form in the first decade of the nineteenth century drew on women’s accepted strengths, and were often connected to their churches. No one questioned the rightness of Christian women saving widows and orphans.

Written petitions were another respectable way for women to make their opinions known. They could be passed among friends and signed in the security and privacy of the home. Petition campaigns were a tried-and-true form of female activism for decades. But they were not directed only toward acceptably safe “women’s topics.” Women used petitions to oppose both the Indian removal plan and slavery.

Abolition was the issue that first brought black women and white women into the public sphere. It was a dangerous subject at a dangerous time, and women took new risks. A few spoke to “promiscuous” groups—men and women together—and to racially mixed groups. They were violating strict social rules about women’s proper place, and the results could be violent. The question of women’s role was

so threatening that it divided the abolition movement.

Throughout the century, in several different areas of reform, women developed important organizational skills and built on their perceived strengths. As they expanded their reach, they challenged stereotypes, sexual double standards, and male power within the family. When the 1848 convention in Seneca Falls demanded full citizenship rights for women, it drew on decades of activism and lessons learned, and aimed the spotlight directly on the central issue of women’s rights.

The resources in Module 2 are arranged chronologically, so they begin with benevolent societies and end with a sharpened focus on suffrage. But they do not represent a linear progression, as if one group of women began with benevolent societies and ended up wearing pants and fighting for the vote. The story of women reformers, and the history of reform movements, is far more complex. But the chronology represents an important reality: over time, women increasingly took public stands on the most compelling of the national conversations, and proved they could. They also continued to meet resistance.