



## American Women before the Revolutionary War

### المرأة الأمريكية قبل الثورة

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### Abstract

*A Woman's life in early America was featured with the traditional roles that were related, most of the time, to running the house, farming, and raising their children. These roles varied based on social class, wealth, and status. In colonial America, colonists created their own laws and system that were similar to that of England. Though colonists agreed on their whole perception of a woman's role in the society, there still had been some differences concerning educating girls, preparing them to get married, and allowing them to own a property. As well as being free at the level of legal status and political participation and choices.*

**Keywords:** America, Colonial, Education, Marriage, Property, Women

### ملخص

تميزت حياة المرأة بأمريكا في القديم بأدوار تقليدية تمثلت في معظم الأحيان في إدارة المنزل والزراعة وتربية الأطفال. إن هذه الأدوار اختلفت على أساس الطبقة الاجتماعية والثروة والحالة الاجتماعية. في أمريكا المستعمرة أنشأ المستعمرون قوانينهم ونظمهم الخاصة بالمجتمع والتي تشبه القوانين الموجودة في إنجلترا وبالرغم من وجود تشابه في التصور الكامل لدور المرأة في المجتمع إلا أنه كانت هناك بعض الاختلافات فيما يخص تعليم الفتيات وإعدادهن للزواج والسماح لهن بالحصول على ممتلكات. فضلا عن مونها حرية على مستوى وضعها القانوني ومشاركتها السياسية واختياراتها.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التعليم، النساء، أمريكا، الزواج، مستعمرة، ممتلكات

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The English, after settling in America, set rules that governed the colonies along with the societal rules that were inherited from the European heritage. Women had few if any liberties to enjoy during the colonization of the British, the rules were derived from a variety of sources, social, religious, and historical. Be it a percept, a law or a custom the English society ascertained the up to standard stricture of the lives of women and men.<sup>1</sup>The situation of a woman in colonial American society, in general, was prevailed and overwhelmed with negativity; whether she born rich or poor, she confronted boundaries and limitations on different aspects of life especially, economic freedom, legal identity, and formal authority access.<sup>2</sup>Women's education, marriage, property owning, legal status, and political behavior were defined and perceived in different ways and various sets; from one colony to another, from one social class to another, and from one religious group to another.

## II. EDUCATION

As far as education is concerned, American girls' education was so limited that less than one-third of the women in colonial America could not sign their names, they were not allowed to attend the school<sup>3</sup>. The primary motivation for teaching girls reading skills throughout most of the early American period was to promote religious instruction and the ability to read the Bible, because women were responsible for educating their young children<sup>4</sup>. Women did not go to college because they were believed to have non-sufficient brains that could not understand abstract thoughts and ideas, so they had a chance to accomplish just the elementary education. On the other hand, sons were able to learn skilled trades, and they were involved in the family business, or they had the chance to go to college<sup>5</sup>.

Girls' education was subjected to gender differences; there was a gap between the males and females' education because it was considered a non-beneficial affair to educate girls. Not only females were being discriminated, they also were believed to be inferior to males thus there was no need to be educated like males<sup>6</sup>. When it comes to obtaining higher education, girls were not allowed to attend the schools except in the case when boys are not studying, mainly in summer, or when there was vacant room that was not used by boys.

The colonies created an educational system in which schools were established to limit ignorance among the population and those schools received boys and girls. The school days for girls were somewhat different. Girls learned enough reading, writing, and arithmetic to read their Bibles and be able to record household expenses. They were taught by a governess, who was usually from England and somewhat educated. They studied art, music, French, social etiquette, needlework, spinning, weaving, cooking, and nursing<sup>7</sup>. The girls did not have the opportunity to go to England for higher education because this was not considered important for them. The schools taught reading, writing, and arithmetic, minimal female participation. Girls' education had religious and domestic purposes; schools formed girls to be future housewives. They did not obtain higher studies because it was thought to be unnecessary and so far to accomplish since they needed to go to England for that<sup>8</sup>.

For the issue of permission and encouragement to obtain education beyond basic abilities in reading and writing, most colonial women were neither encouraged nor permitted to do so. For with girls and young women, for example, their education was mostly restricted to domestic skills and decorative arts<sup>9</sup>. Race, class, and location defined the level and manner of women's education in colonial America. One of the most important reasons of a woman's education was just to have the appropriate husband, and women who obtained higher education and academic one were not required by men.

In his book, *John Winthrop: America's Forgotten Founding Father*, Bremer (2005) talked about the Governor of Connecticut Edward Hopkins who was shocked of his wife's interest in reading books saying that "If she had attended her household affairs and such things as belong to women, and not gone out of her way and calling to meddle in such things as are proper to men, whose minds are stronger...she might have kept her wits"<sup>10</sup> A woman who was literate was seen as an insane, many stories were told about men who were shocked and distressed by the fact that their women could read and write.

By the eighteenth century, the colonies in America became well-established and the population exploded. In general, women were still not formally educated and they did not enjoy the same freedom and social powers as men; women did not enjoy a formal education, besides to that their freedom and social powers such as being the head of the household or even the right of land ownership<sup>11</sup>.

Girls received no formal education; they did not register for formal schools, instead they were enrolled in "Dame School" where they had been taught by women who barely could teach them how to babysit their future children. A "Dame School"<sup>12</sup> was neither formal nor permanent, and it usually was run by a woman for the sake of earning some income, the teachers were not graduated from formal schools either.

Like most women in preindustrial societies, eighteenth-century American women lived in what might be called a woman's domain. Their daily activities took place within a feminine, domestic circle: infants were delivered by midwives; the sick were cared for by nurses...we may think of women as forming a tradition-bound.<sup>13</sup> Women had a specific role to conduct that merely was restricted in their houses, and that was their typical function in society. It was part of the traditions to consider women's place was their domestic sphere and that was the norm in the colonial American society.

### III. MARRIAGE

Women were expected to marry so it was inevitable for them to get married because they were created to complete men's life, and to get an economic security as well as economic stability. "A colonial woman was expected to be subservient to her father until she married, and then to her husband."<sup>14</sup> A woman's responsibility was her father's before marriage, but after marriage her husband takes responsibility and she becomes submissive to him. "Even though women played an integral part in the development of colonial America, their status was viewed as one subordinate in nature...women were expected to follow a strict moral code of behavior including modesty, restraint, passivity, compliance, submission, delicacy, and most important of all, chastity."<sup>15</sup> Women submitted to their husbands' will because that was axiomatic as a nature's law and a man's law as well. They were regarded as a model of virtue.

“By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in the law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything.”<sup>16</sup> A woman’s legal status melts in her husband’s after marriage. Marriage restricted women even in their legal status where they were considered as subordinate to their husbands; they had no legal identity separate from their husbands.

“Marriage changed a woman’s name and legal status, but it also changed her economic status and her role within her family and the community.”<sup>17</sup> The name that a woman carried from her childhood changes just after marriage which means her known identity changes after it is linked to her husband’s. After marriage, a woman generally assumed the responsibility of running the household, bearing and caring for children, and nursing the sick—skills she may have practiced as a single woman, but without the authority or responsibility of being the mistress of the household. Responsibilities between a wife and a husband are defined by society, the wife after marriage practices the theoretical roles she had been taught an expected to do.

Marriage, of course, brought other changes for a woman, as she moved from her parents’ home to her husband’s. In addition to being in charge of domestic matters, she might also assist her husband in his business, or even run the business while he was away. Marriage also legitimized her role as a sexual being and mother. Women’s dependency to their husbands and to their fathers before marriage is defined in the colonial society as being a kind of manifestation. Women, by marriage, sought the legitimacy of being a sex partner and a mother as well.

“The women who had life the toughest were at the lower end of the social order: white servants and black slaves. For them, the laws offered few protections from violence and potentially harsh punishments.”<sup>18</sup> Marriage bounds were even tougher for the lower classes in the colonial society where white servants and black slaves suffered more compared to free white women and upper classes’ women. White servant women, a significant portion of the population in the southern colonies, especially in the seventeenth century, could not marry without their master’s permission. If they came over as indentured servants from England, they were bound until age 24. They were protected, neither from the law nor from customs and traditions against violence and mistreatment of their masters who could prevent them from marrying until they reach the twenty-four years old.

In case of the husband’s death, women in colonial America experienced “Widowhood”; “whether a widow should remarry or not centered on three inextricably linked factors: her age, her wealth, and her sexual freedom”.<sup>19</sup> Young widows were likely ready to remarry so that they feel secure in a patriarchal society especially if they had children who usually were unable to take care of their mother and themselves, and if she has inherited a wealth she would need someone to run her property. Older widows, on the other hand, chose to stay single and run their own property especially if they had older sons whom they would depend on or they just depend on themselves and exercise independence. Widowhood was a common form of a single woman along with spinsterhood which was considered the second form of being a single woman.

If a woman chose to stay single she would face all kinds of accusations, and she would be considered as being abnormal. “In the colonial era, remaining a spinster had been a mark

of opprobrium; it usually meant a dismal life of quasi-dependence, living in relatives' homes."<sup>20</sup> Spinsterhood was a mark of rejection; it was a life of dependency as well because unmarried women were considered a burden to their families and relatives.

"The usual story of spinsterhood in early America is a bleak one. Women who never married, we are told, spent their lives regretting that they had missed the essential female experiences of marriage and motherhood."<sup>21</sup> Women who did not get married lived a life of depression and guilt for they did not fulfill their natural needs of being a wife and a mother.

Social disapproval of unmarried women increased as women aged in colonial America. While single women in their mid-twenties might be viewed with both "alarm and pity," a thirty-year-old New England spinster would be openly labeled a "thornback." Often forced to rely on brothers and other relatives for support in late life.<sup>22</sup> when they reached a certain age, single women started to be labeled and described with mean descriptions, and they were obliged to depend on their brothers and relatives, they were deprived from their rights to work or to get financial independence.

#### IV. PROPERTY OWNING

If they were married, women could not own land in their names. Men usually willed real estate to surviving sons and only personal property to surviving daughters, ensuring that land would pass from man to man. There was a sense of patriarchal ownership in which women were not allowed to own lands neither from their fathers nor from their husbands except in rare cases.

Any property owned before marriage and any earnings made during marriage legally belonged to their husband. Women had no ownership of either. They were not independent citizens in any way; they could not enter into a contract, sue, or be sued.<sup>23</sup> Women belonged to their husbands with their properties if any, and they had no right in owning any kind of property be it inherited or gained. They also had no right to prosecute or to be prosecuted because they were considered man's "property". Married women's legal status was overwhelmed by their husbands'. Even their social status was linked to their husband's.

Married women were not able to own property, businesses, or keep their own wages if they worked outside the house. Their jobs were only to take care of the house and raise the children, rarely were they allowed leaving the house unless needed at a family-owned business. The only work a woman could get was to be a seamstress, or keep boarding houses; most jobs were reserved for men. When a woman remarried, the land and possessions that she inherited from her deceased husband became the property of her new husband immediately.<sup>24</sup> Not only a woman could not own a property or a business, but also her inherited possessions from previous husband went automatically to her new spouse. A married woman could not even write a will.

For the case of widows and unmarried women in colonial America, they enjoyed some freedoms compared to the married women; they had the ability to make a will since they own a property, they also had the ability to buy or sell their own property. They even could sue and be sued. The law required that a widow was entitled to her third of the property and this was referred to as the widow's thirds. The widow's thirds included one-third of the real property such as lands and houses, for her lifetime and one-third full ownership of the

personal property, which included slaves and household goods.<sup>25</sup> Single women, spinsters or widows, gave special attention when writing their wills and the disposition of their property to their sisters or spinster daughters; they, most of the time, left their considerable legacies to their sisters and daughters. Single Women developed a sensitive reaction towards each other because they knew how it was like to be single with no one to provide with an economic support.

## **V.LEGAL AND POLITICAL STATUS**

The most known legal difference between women and men in colonial America was that of being free or not. "All of them [women] are understood either married or to be married."<sup>26</sup> The legal rights of Colonial women were few. Men dominated society, and women were subjugated to the men in their families such as their fathers, brothers, and husbands if they were married. Women were banned from holding property or possessing legal identity separately from their husbands or fathers. Women's identity was defined by their roles as wives and mothers, rather than as a legal entity. Their legal identity was defined by their marital status, they were categorized either being single "femes sole" or married "femes covert".

"Feme Covert" is the situation where a woman lost her legal identity after marriage where her husband acts like a legal guardian; she literally loses her separate legal status. On the other hand, "Feme Sole" is the situation where a woman has the same legal advantages just like men, a single, adult woman can have contracts, sue her debtors, and arrange her personal property.<sup>27</sup> Both concepts were legal and social realities in Colonial America; the married woman was virtually owned by her husband and her legal existence was suspended by marriage unlike the single woman who was legally advantageous.

As a widow, a woman did not have to adhere to the laws of coverture and her position within the family and society changed dramatically. The legal position of a wife changed when she was widowed. As a widow, a woman gained more autonomy, as she was no longer under coverture. In her widowhood, a woman could create legal documents, inherit land, manage estates, and bring lawsuits to court. Widows and unmarried adult women could own property, collect rents, manage shops, and have standing in court.<sup>28</sup>

Widows in all the colonies were expected to be virtuous, compassionate, and pious. If these expectations were not met, a widow would be perceived as a whore or wanton. Widows in the colonies were advised to revive the memory of their husband. Despite the freedom she gained, a widow was still expected to be a virtuous person otherwise she would be labeled as being a disrespectful.

The right to vote in Colonial America was featured by its dominance of white male adult who owned a property and aged twenty-one.<sup>29</sup> The conditions for voting excluded women from voting since colonists stated clearly that males not females were allowed to vote, and stated that those who owned property had the right to vote which was not the case

for the majority of women especially married ones. The latter were considered one single identity with the husband who obviously voted on her behalf.

The Burgesses had confirmed the conditions of voting patterns stating that "No woman sole or covert, infants under the age of twenty one years, or recusant convert being freeholders shall be enabled to give a vote or have a voice in the election of burgesses"<sup>30</sup> Regardless of women's status single or married, they could not vote based on the English Common Law traditions; they could not be a part of the political arena and because of the known fact of colonial American women being fragile creatures that could not handle politics and its rough atmosphere, they were excluded from the political arena.

For the most part, American colonists adopted the voter qualifications that they had known in England. Typically, a voter had to be a free, adult, male resident of his county, a member of the predominant religious group, and a "freeholder." A freeholder owned land worth a certain amount of money. Colonists believed only freeholders should vote because only they had a permanent stake in the stability of society. Freeholders also paid the bulk of the taxes.<sup>31</sup> Women were excluded from the voting process since colonists restricted voting qualifications to males and land owners and considered that women had ineffective role in society compared to men.

Women's participation in the political life was in an indirect way; they participated in the political life of the colony even though they had no official role. While it was possible that a few wealthy widows may have voted in the seventeenth century, a 1699 law made clear that this was a male-only activity. Women did, however, help enfranchise men through land they brought to a marriage and this in turn gave some of them indirect power to influence the voting behavior of their husbands. Candidates, too, understood that treating wives with cordiality and respect might impact the outcome of an election.<sup>32</sup> The role of a colonial wife was to affect her husband's voting choice, and financially aiding him despite the fact that she has no right to vote on her own.

There were plenty of examples of women who claimed their right to vote and their right to sue or to be sued as early as 1640s. Margaret Brent, the first woman lawyer in America, arrived in the Colony of Maryland in 1638. She was involved in over 100 court cases in Maryland and Virginia, and was a major landowner as well. Governor Calvert chose her as the executor of his Will. As such, and separately on her own behalf as a major landowner, in 1648 she formally demanded a "vote and voyce" in the Maryland Assembly two votes, in fact. The new Governor, Thomas Green, denied her request.<sup>33</sup> For the case of Margaret Brent, she based her request on the fact that she was a landowner and a freeholder.

Another example of those prominent women was Susannah Wright who became prothonotary of her colony, she augmented her legal status to become a counselor that helped her illiterate fellow citizens, and she helped women in their wills, deeds, indentures,

and other contracts. She even acted like an intermediate in solving property disputes.<sup>34</sup> Wright was able via books, periodicals, and letters to keep up with political and scientific debates taking place in Philadelphia and London. She paved her solid road towards being a strong political woman.

The first known woman to be voting was Lydia Chapin Taft and that was in 1756 in Uxbridge, Massachusetts,<sup>35</sup> she voted in a town meeting on whether to provide a financial aid for local soldiers to fight in the French and Indian War; she was the richest woman in the town after the decease of her husband and her elder son as well, she left with a fortune that was needed at that critical time of the war, so she was the colonists only choice to get funds. Lydia was not supposed to vote, she accidentally voted because she had a special case where she was needed the most otherwise she would never have that political action.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

Women enjoyed no kind of liberties and that led them to feel negative about themselves because they felt that they were restricted either by laws, customs, or traditions. Besides they had no total freedom economically, legally, or at the level of having a formal authority positions. There had been discrimination between men and women based on customs and traditions.

As far as, education is concerned women enjoyed little rights concerning literacy, and few of them were able to read and write, they granted a religious education to understand the Bible and to teach their children. Literacy was considered as a dangerous aspect for women because it was restricted to men.

It was really such a bizarre action for women to show interest in reading which specifically a male's deed was. They even considered women to be mentally unstable, and their minds are not strong enough to handle reading. Even encouragement for women's education was a rare act to do during the colonial period in America; their education was limited to domestic skills because home was considered the best place for a woman.

Marriage made women one identity with her husband, and made her restricted and invisible to the law that considered her and her husband as one. Marriage erased her old name and replaced it with her husband's. A woman supposed to take care of her children and husband at the expense of herself otherwise she would be labeled., if she chose to stay single she was labeled a spinster and even she chose to stay single she enjoyed no rights.

Property owning was a real challenge for women in colonial America, married women had no right to acquire any kind of property, and she was married and her first husband died, and she wanted to remarry what she had from her deceased husband becomes automatically the property of the second husband, she and her property become the husband's property; the husband owns her and her property, she could not even write a will



or sue or be sued. On the other hand, unmarried women could own property and could write a will.

Legal status of married women “feme covert” made her linked to her husband, and made him decide for her life, even “feme Sole” did not enjoy too much freedom. Participating in the political life was the most inexperienced thing a woman could have; based on law she was excluded from voting and participating in the political field. A woman was believed to be incapable of taking serious decisions in her house how she could take a political decision such as choosing a governor. Women have been subjected to social, legal, and political restraints, despite all that, women remained in some cases strong and fought for what they deserve.

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