

BOOKS BY MARY BETH NORTON

The British-Americans

Liberty's Daughters

"To Toil the Livelong Day" (edited with Carol Groneman)

Women of America (edited with Carol Berkin)

LIBERTY'S DAUGHTERS



*The Revolutionary Experience of
American Women, 1750–1800*

With a New Preface

MARY BETH NORTON

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For
Judith Long Laws, Carol Berkin, Linda Waugh,
Lydia Bronte, Patuline Maier, and Calista Sullivan:
Friends and Colleagues

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PREFACE TO THE CORNELL PAPERBACKS EDITION

The republication of *Liberty's Daughters* gives me a welcome opportunity to reflect on the circumstances of the book's composition and on subsequent developments in scholarship on women in revolutionary America. This book constituted my first major venture into a field that has ever since supplied my primary vocation. Traditionally trained as an early Americanist in the mid to late 1960s, I had no instruction in women's history at the undergraduate or graduate level, and so, along with others of my generation of women's historians, I am self-taught in the subject. Unquestionably, the most important phase of that self-instruction occurred while I was working on *Liberty's Daughters*.

Reading the first modern scholarly articles on American women's history, which were published in the late 1960s by such pioneers as Barbara Welter and Gerda Lerner, led me to become interested in what was then a novel and unconventional approach to scholarship. Lerner's and Welter's work focused on antebellum America; what, I began to wonder, would be the result of posing similar analytical questions about women during the revolutionary era? Most studies of colonial women had consisted largely of compilations of anecdotes (see the essay on sources, below, 304–305). Even though I did not explicitly pursue inquiries about women in my doctoral research on the loyalists of the American Revolution, I had read many letters that passed between

wives and husbands or mothers and sons. Furthermore, although I knew little about eighteenth-century women, I had learned a great deal about loyalists and the documentary sources generated by and about them. Accordingly, it seemed logical to examine loyalist women in my first foray into this new field. Specifically, the extensive claims for losses of property and income submitted by male and female loyalists to the British government in the 1780s would allow an investigation of historians' long-standing assumption that women were intimately involved in the financial affairs of preindustrial Anglo-American households. Since claimants had to describe their prewar possessions in great detail, a sex-differentiated analysis of the documents would reveal whether men and women were equally conversant with their families' holdings of real and personal property.

That project required a rereading of sources I had surveyed for my doctoral work (which by then had been published in my book *The British-Americans: The Loyalist Exiles in England, 1774-1789* [1972]). The results of the research surprised me and have ever since served as a reminder to be skeptical of the "received wisdom" often found in the accumulated historiography about women. In my article "Eighteenth-Century American Women in Peace and War: The Case of the Loyalists" (*William and Mary Quarterly*, 1976), I reported loyalist women's inability to describe in detail the value of their families' lost possessions, concluding that they had for the most part been ignorant of legal and financial matters before the war. While my work on this limited study was underway, I began to read widely in the published letters and diaries of revolutionaries as well as loyalists. That research, which eventually encompassed hundreds of unpublished manuscript collections, formed the basis of *Liberty's Daughters*.

Like many other works on women's history researched and written during the 1970s (most notably, Nancy F. Cott's *Bonds of Womanhood* [1977], Laurel Ulrich's *Good Wives* [1982], and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's influential article "The Female World of Love and Ritual" [*Signs*, 1976]), *Liberty's Daughters* takes as its central focus women's personal experience. I concentrated on describing and analyzing the details of women's daily lives, employing extensive quotations from colonial women's private writings to allow them to speak for themselves. That Cott, Ulrich, Smith-Rosenberg, I, and others adopted such an approach more or less simultaneously was no accident. All of us were

reacting against a then-current trend in American women's history that stressed the ways in which men oppressed women and that accordingly (and ironically) tended to emphasize writings *about* women rather than women's writings about themselves. We had the same goal: to place women and their lives at the core of our narratives.

Therefore, when planning the organization of this book, I explicitly decided to be guided by eighteenth-century women's own assessments of importance, as reflected in the contents of their letters and diary entries. Topics ubiquitous in their writings would take precedence over those about which they wrote little. Certain subjects that had received systematic treatment in the historical literature (for example, the legal status of married women) would be handled in the context of women's lived experience rather than as separate analytical categories. Always I would try to focus on the experiences that characterized the lives of most women at the time. Thus the book would say nothing about female criminals, little about camp followers, little about slave women on small farms, little or nothing about such idiosyncratic female icons of the Revolution as Betsy Ross, Molly Pitcher, or Deborah Sampson.

White women's responsibilities as mistresses of families seemed to me to determine fundamentally the parameters of their lives, and so their household obligations became the subject of the first chapter. Relationships with husbands and children, self-perceptions, and relatively rare instances of independent initiative at times other than the war years constituted the other key topics in the first section. For the period during and after the Revolution, discussed in the second section, I also allowed women's own concerns to identify the significant issues. Political discussions and activism, the disruptions of the war, and post-war changes in self-assessments and in girls' education: all these topics were ever-present in women's diaries and letters from the 1770s through the 1790s. Feeling that I had come to know many of these women personally from reading years (and sometimes decades) of their diaries and correspondence, I wanted to represent them accurately to a twentieth-century audience. The many positive comments I have subsequently received about the book's structure and its substantial reliance on eighteenth-century women's own words have convinced me that *Liberty's Daughters* achieved that goal.

Several months after the publication of *Liberty's Daughters* in 1980, Linda K. Kerber's similar volume, *Women of the Republic*, joined it in

print. Since 1974 Kerber and I had known that we were working along parallel lines; our paths had even crossed occasionally at various repositories. That two books conceived and researched at the same time could take such different forms provides a classic example of the axiom that no two historians will formulate problems in precisely the same way. Yet our conclusions, though expressed differently, largely resembled each other's. (In a conversation, we concurred that we were looking at the same glass of water: Kerber saw it as half empty, I as half full.) The two books were frequently reviewed together, and scholars predicted that the works heralded the beginnings of a new field of historical inquiry.

Those predictions have proved correct only in part. Subsequent scholars have concentrated their energy on the immediate post-revolutionary period—the years from approximately 1790 to 1820—citing *Liberty's Daughters* as background while elaborating on interpretations pertinent to the early republic rather than to the Revolution. In addition, literary scholars—or historians interested in tracing intellectual developments—have moved more rapidly into the field than have those who pose other sorts of inquiries. Thus a survey of recent books and articles reveals a heavy focus on republican ideology and its impact on women (or the reverse), with a particular emphasis on publications by, about, or intended to be read by women in the years surrounding 1800.

That such is the case undoubtedly results not merely from the response to Kerber's and my books but also from the impact of Cathy N. Davidson's influential *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (1986), the single most important work in the field published since 1980. Davidson directed the attention of historians and literature specialists to the print culture of the period and its relationship to an educated female public actively engaged in reading and writing; the consequence has been an outpouring of articles on a variety of interconnected themes.¹ In the same vein have been a number of articles that attempt to revise, extend, or (occasionally) challenge different aspects of the ideology of republican womanhood first extensively explicated by both Kerber and me. It is hardly surprising, then, that when Kerber in late 1987 chaired a symposium entitled "Beyond Roles, Beyond Spheres: Thinking about Gender in the Early Republic" at the University of Pennsylvania, the participants tended to focus on issues of ideology, language, and discourse rather than on more concrete aspects of women's lives.²

Yet the audience at the symposium was not as drawn to such topics as were most of the panelists. One such "disquieted" historian, Jean Soderlund, has subsequently observed that "an approach that targets ideology alone is too narrowly focused," asking pointedly, "Whose ideology is this?"³ I fully concur with such a reaction to contemporary scholarly trends. Although acknowledging the important insights that have been gained from the new work, I have been disappointed by the lack of emphasis on women's actual experiences. When *Liberty's Daughters* was published, I anticipated that its examination of changes in the lives of elite women would lead others to ask whether the Revolution had a similar impact on ordinary women. The admittedly fragmentary nature of my evidence on enslaved women would, I hoped, encourage other historians to try to unearth more. And I thought that my exposition of the socially disruptive character of the Revolution would direct scholars' attention to the impact of the war on men and women alike. With rare exceptions, none of that has happened.⁴

A few historians have, however, ventured into areas that I did not examine in detail. Legal scholars have explored the property-holding capacity of married women and have begun to investigate women and criminal law;⁵ economic historians have started to look more systematically at the economic standing of women in the revolutionary years;⁶ and historians of religion have stressed the importance to female New Englanders of their spiritual beliefs and of congregations' policies toward their female members.⁷ Other scholars have proposed modifications of interpretations advanced in this book; a few I accept, of some I remain skeptical.⁸

In March 1985, at the U.S. Capitol Historical Society symposium on women in the age of the American Revolution, I remarked that my work constituted only a "first step" and that many key questions about women's experiences in the revolutionary era remained unasked—and accordingly unanswered.⁹ That is still true today, more than a decade later. I hope that this republication of *Liberty's Daughters* will stimulate historians to launch new investigations of this important era.

Mary Beth Norton

Ithaca, New York

ENDNOTES

1. See, for example, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Domesticating 'Virtue': Coquettes and Revolutionaries in Young America," in Elaine Scarry, ed., *Literature and the Body* (Baltimore, 1988), 160–184; and Nina Baym, "Mercy Otis Warren's Gendered Melodrama of Revolution," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, XC (1991), 531–554.
2. Thus Kerber added an Afterword to cover such topics as religious change, race relations, and the impact of the war; see "Forum," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., XLVI (1989), 565–585. Notable among the revisionary works is Rosemarie Zagarri, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother," *American Quarterly*, XLIV (1992), 192–215.
3. Jean R. Soderlund, "Women in Eighteenth-Century Pennsylvania: Toward a Model of Diversity," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XV (1991), 163–183 (quotations 167) (hereafter cited as *PMHB*).
4. One of the few articles on ordinary women is Alfred F. Young, "The Women of Boston: 'Persons of Consequence' in the Making of the American Revolution," in Harriet Applewhite and Darline Levy, eds., *Women & Politics in the Age of the Democratic Revolution* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1990), 181–226. The only two major essays on enslaved women (by David Grimsted and Jacqueline Jones) both appeared in Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Women in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville, Va., 1989) (hereafter cited as *WAAR*). Yet stimulating papers given by Fredrika Teute, David Shields, and David Waldstreicher at the 1996 OAH Convention have recently moved scholarship in innovative and promising directions.
5. See Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1986); her related article in *WAAR*, 447–475; G. S. Rowe, "Women's Crime and Criminal Administration in Pennsylvania, 1763–1790," *PMHB*, CIX (1985), 335–368; and Rowe, "Infanticide, Its Judicial Resolution, and Criminal Code Revision in Early Pennsylvania," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, CXXXV (1991), 200–232.
6. See part one of *WAAR*; and Claudia Goldin, "The Economic Status of Women in the Early Republic," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XVI (1985–1986), 375–404.
7. For example, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich in *WAAR*, 211–243; and Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics & Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994).
8. For example, Judith Klinghoffer and Lois Elkins have not convinced me that New Jersey assemblymen deliberately enfranchised women in 1776 (cf. their article, "'The Petticoat Electors': Women's Suffrage in New Jersey, 1776–1807," *Journal of the Early Republic*, XII [1992], 159–193, with pp. 191–193, below). Yet Laurel Ulrich has persuaded me that colonial women acted as "deputy husbands" more often than I thought (see her *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* [New York, 1982], chapter 2); and Suzanne Lebsock's *Free Women of Petersburg* (New York, 1984; see chapter 6) has convinced me that I erred in concluding that women viewed all their household work as drudgery.
9. *WAAR*, 492.

PREFACE TO THE 1980 EDITION

In eighteenth-century America, women's lives centered upon their homes and families. Thus this book, too, necessarily concentrates upon the familial realm. Its guiding assumption is that colonial women's attitudes toward themselves, their families, and the world around them were shaped by a combination of their own daily experiences and society's expectations of them. Accordingly, it carefully delineates the range of female roles, emphasizing the troika that defined the life of the mature woman — wife, mother, and household mistress — but paying attention as well to a female's earlier experience as daughter and her later one as widow.

When I began to research this topic in 1972, I wanted to address a series of questions never previously asked by scholars of early American history, and to include both blacks and whites in my study.¹ In particular, I hoped to examine eighteenth-century women's self-perceptions, the influence of their sexual identity on all phases of their lives, and, perhaps most importantly, the impact of the American Revolution upon them. At the outset I was not at all certain that my goal could be reached, for the sources were reputedly sparse, unrevealing, even (it was said) nonexistent. Yet such pessimism proved completely unwarranted. My research into the published and unpublished papers of approximately 450 eighteenth-century families, coupled with the study of government records housed on both sides of the Atlantic, has uncovered a wealth of material and has led me to question historians' common assumptions about the lives of colonial women.

Perhaps the most central of these — one that has been largely accepted until very recent years — is the notion that the preindustrial American woman's essential economic contribution to the household gave her a social status higher than that of both her European contemporaries and her nineteenth-century descendants. (Of course, such an observation applies only to whites, although authors have not explicitly made a racial distinction.) It has long been contended that white female colonists were relatively equal partners within the home, that they often engaged in business activities outside the household, that gender roles were not sharply defined, and that women consequently developed high self-esteem.²

The conclusions reached in the pages that follow challenge that construct on every point. Eighteenth-century Americans proved to have very clear ideas of which tasks were properly "feminine" and which were not; of what behavior was appropriate for females, especially white females; and of what functions "the sex" was expected to perform. Moreover, both men and women continually indicated in subtle ways that they believed women to be inferior to men. Far from having a high status and an excellent opinion of themselves and their abilities, most of the white women who lived in pre-revolutionary America turned out to display low self-esteem, to have very limited conceptions of themselves and their roles, and to habitually denigrate their sex in general.

These findings therefore call into question the generally accepted chronology of women's history, which — to put it too simplistically — argues that following a "golden age" of equality (which for some authors encompasses only the seventeenth century but for most includes much of the eighteenth) white women "lost status," declining into the presumed helplessness of rigidly defined sexual spheres that culminated in the Victorian era. Some scholars of the nineteenth century have begun to challenge the latter part of this formulation by emphasizing the potential for the development of "domestic feminism"; when their conclusions are viewed in conjunction with mine, it appears that the older theory should now be abandoned.³

One of the hallmarks of the traditional approach to the history of early American women has been a failure to discuss the American Revolution in any detail. In the standard chronology, the chief villain causing woman's "decline and fall" was industrialization, and so the previous centuries were seen as a halcyonic, premodern whole, leaving no conceptual space for a consideration of the Revolution. Those scholars who have examined women's

lives in the revolutionary era have confined themselves to an anecdotal treatment of women's contributions to the war effort and have neglected to inquire into the long-term impact of the conflict on female Americans. Recently, Joan Hoff Wilson explicitly investigated that crucial subject, but she concluded that the Revolution had little effect upon women, except perhaps a negative one.⁴

Yet evidence from other times and places suggests that wars in general, and revolutions in particular, can have a major impact upon women's lives. Anne Firor Scott's analysis of the Civil War and William Chafe's of the Second World War show how those conflicts significantly affected American women. Recent works on the French Revolution and the English Civil War conclude that those internal upheavals altered women's experiences in measurable ways. Moreover, an anthropologist's cross-cultural study of female status indicates that one of the chief factors influencing women's roles is the presence or absence of men. In times of war, she argues, the balance of work roles and, indeed, of the exercise of some types of power, necessarily shifts from male to female because of men's prolonged absence from the home.⁵

My study of the American Revolution is more in accord with these discussions of other societies and chronological periods than with the conventional literature of American women's history. In my opinion, the Revolution had an indelible effect upon American women, but its consequences cannot for the most part be discovered in the public world of law and politics, where they have previously been sought. The postrevolutionary years brought no widespread reform of legal codes, no universal enfranchisement of women, no public feminist movement. Instead, the 1780s and 1790s witnessed changes in women's private lives — in familial organization, personal aspirations, self-assessments. In short, the Revolution's impact is more accurately revealed in an analysis of women's private writings than in an examination of formal actions implemented by men.

But there is a potentially serious drawback to a concentration on women's writings as the primary source of evidence, for only about half the white American female population in the eighteenth century may have been sufficiently literate to sign a name to a will.⁶ Moreover, that minimal level of competence by no means implied the ability to write an occasional letter, much less to correspond regularly with friends or relatives or to keep a diary. As a result, despite the large number (368) of unpublished collections of family papers that I consulted, my findings cannot be said to be based upon a representative cross section of the American female populace.

Nevertheless, I would argue that this book accurately depicts many aspects of the lives of all eighteenth-century American women, not just those from the middling and upper ranks of society. The regional coverage is broad, from the St. Lawrence River in the north to St. Augustine in the south to Kentucky, Ohio, and Louisiana in the west. Further, the opinions and actions of poor, illiterate white and black women were often noted by travelers and other observers, by their masters and mistresses, or by government officials. Such indirect sources must be used with care, but they can provide information about women who did not leave written records of their own. In addition, much of the book is concerned with the universals of female lives — courtship, marriage, pregnancy and childbirth, child rearing, and household work — and in spite of obvious variations arising from race, wealth, or place of residence, these common experiences of femininity made women in many ways more alike than different. Accordingly, for the purposes of this book, it seems possible to allow the literate portion of the female population to speak for their illiterate counterparts.

The book is divided into two sections. The first, composed of five chapters, traces the constant patterns of women's lives, those aspects of their existence that remained basically the same during the last half of the eighteenth century, both before and after the Revolution. The second, with four chapters, examines some new trends that first appeared in the revolutionary and postrevolutionary years. This rather complex organization results from the fact that the material did not fit a neat chronological framework. Indeed, as will become evident in the later chapters, the picture was further complicated by the appearance of varying patterns within the postwar trends. Some of the new ways quickly supplanted the old, but in other instances new styles developed alongside old ones, paralleling but not completely replacing them by 1800.

The last chapter and the conclusion indicate the ways in which I think these late eighteenth-century trends were related to nineteenth-century developments. On the other end of the chronological scale, though, I mean to imply no specific interpretation of women's experiences prior to 1750, and especially not before 1700. The lives of colonial women in the seventeenth century might have been similar to or different from those I describe in the mid-eighteenth century; I do not know which, nor do I intend to speculate about a subject on which there is at present such inadequate information.⁷ I would simply observe in passing that, if I have learned anything from my research, it is that most of the widely held assumptions about the lives of colonial women cannot withstand careful scrutiny.

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All researchers recognize that their work would be far more difficult without the advice and assistance of archivists. Because almost all current manuscript indexes and catalogs inadequately describe women's papers, I am even more indebted than usual to the knowledgeable staffs of the many libraries I visited. My sincere thanks go to them all, for without their help this book would have been impossible to write. I am also grateful to the staff of the Catalog of American Portraits at the National Portrait Gallery,

Chapter Six



WE COMMENCED PERFECT STATESMEN

THE DECADE OF TURBULENCE THAT PRECEDED THE REVOLUTION touched the lives of colonial women as well as men. Public demonstrations against British policy and its supporters, celebrations of the repeal of hated parliamentary acts, days of fast or thanksgiving proclaimed by colonial governments, and incidents of mob action necessarily impinged upon the consciousness of women who had previously left public affairs entirely to their husbands, fathers, and brothers. Still more important, when American leaders decided to use economic boycotts in their struggle against Great Britain, women's domestic roles took on political significance. The chosen tactics could succeed only if white housewives and their daughters refused to purchase imported goods and simultaneously increased their production of homespun. Even the work assignments of female slaves would have to be changed if the colonial policy was to be fully effective. Thus the attention of male political leaders had to focus on the realm of the household, and the public recognition accorded the female role irreversibly altered its inferior status. Although traditional denigrating attitudes would continue to be voiced as late as the 1790s, the re-evaluation of domesticity that began during the revolutionary years would eventually culminate in nineteenth-century culture's glorification of woman's household role.

In addition, during the revolutionary decades the boundaries of the feminine sphere itself began to change. White women, who in the mid-1760s offered profuse apologies whenever they dared to discuss politics, were by the 1780s reading widely in political literature, publishing their own sentiments, engaging in heated debates over public policy, and avidly supporting the war effort in a variety of ways. Indeed, some females were so unstinting in their activism that disagreements over politics during the war led to broken marriages and friendships. Moreover, their commitment to the Revolution caused a number of Philadelphia women to attempt to establish the first nationwide female organization. Even though they had only limited success, the very fact that women embarked upon such an ambitious, unprecedented venture revealed the extent to which their lives had been reshaped during the preceding years.

I

Women could hardly have remained aloof from the events of the 1760s and early 1770s even had they so desired, for, like male Americans, they witnessed the escalating violence of the prerevolutionary decade. Into their letters and diary entries — which had previously been devoted exclusively to private affairs — crept descriptions of Stamp Act riots and “Rejoicings” at the law’s repeal, accounts of solemn fast-day observances, and reports of crowd actions aimed at silencing dissidents. The young Boston shopkeeper Betsy Cuming, for instance, was visiting a sick friend one day in 1769 when she heard “a voilint Skreeming Kill him Kill him” and looked out the window to see John Mein, a printer whose publications had enraged the radicals, being chased by a large crowd armed with sticks and guns. Later that evening Betsy watched “ful a thousand Man & boys” dragging around the city “a Kart [on which] a Man was Exhibited as . . . in a Gore of Blod.” At first Betsy believed Mein had been caught, but she then learned that the victim was an unfortunate customs informer who had fallen into the crowd’s hands after Mein made a successful escape.¹

Betsy herself confronted an angry group of Bostonians only a few weeks later. She and her sister Anne had just unpacked a new shipment of English goods when “the Comitey wated” on them, accusing them of violating the nonimportation agreement. “I told them we have never antred into eney agreement not to import for it was verrey trifling ovr Business,” Betsy explained to her friend and financial backer Elizabeth Murray Smith. She charged the committeemen with trying “to inger two industrious Girls who ware Striving in an honest way to Git there Bread,” resolutely ignoring their threat to publish her name in the newspaper as an enemy to America. In the end, Betsy and Anne discovered, the publicity “Spirits up our Friends to Purchess from us,” and they informed Mrs. Smith that they ended the year with “mor custom then before.”²

Despite their bravado the Cuming sisters had learned an important political lesson: persons with their conservative beliefs were no longer welcome in Massachusetts. As a result, they emigrated to Nova Scotia when the British army evacuated Boston in 1776. Patriot women, too, learned lessons of partisanship. Instead of being the targets of crowds, they actively participated in them. They marched in ritual processions, harassed female loyalists, and, during the war, seized essential supplies from merchants whom they believed to be monopolistic hoarders.³ In addition, they prepared food for militia musters and, in the early days of September 1774 — when the New England militia gathered in Cambridge in response to a false rumor that British troops were mounting an attack on the populace — they were reported by one observer to have “surpassed the Men for Eagerness & Spirit in the Defence of Liberty by Arms.” As he rode along the road to Boston, he recounted later, he saw “at every house Women & Children making Cartridges, running Bullets, making Wallets, baking Biscuit, crying & bemoaning & at the same time animating their Husbands & Sons to fight for their Liberties, tho’ not knowing whether they should ever see them again.”⁴

The activism of female patriots found particular expression in their support of the colonial boycott of tea and other items taxed by the Townshend Act of 1767. Male leaders recognized that they needed women’s cooperation to ensure that Americans would comply with the request to forgo the use of tea and luxury goods until the act was

[January, 1770]
[1773 (B)]

WILLIAM JACKSON,
an **IMPORTER**; at the
BRAZEN HEAD,
North Side of the TOWN-HOUSE,
and Opposite the Town-Pump, in
Corn-hill, BOSTON.

It is desired that the **SONS and**
DAUGHTERS of LIBERTY,
would not buy any one thing of
him, for in so doing they will bring
Disgrace upon *themselves*, and their
Posterity, for ever and ever, AMEN.

revealed. Accordingly, newspaper essays urged women to participate in the boycott, and American editors frequently praised those females who refused to drink foreign Bohea tea, substituting instead coffee or local herbal teas. A gathering of New Hampshire women, for example, won applause for having "made their Breakfast upon Rye Coffee," and it was reported that in Newport a group of ladies "most judiciously rejected the poisonous Bohea, and unanimously, to their great honour, preferred the balsamic Hyperion."⁵

The South Carolina Presbyterian William Tennent III directed an emotionally charged appeal on the subject of the tea boycott to the women of his province in August 1774. Calling upon his readers to help save America "from the Dagger of Tyranny," Tennent emphasized the "trivial Pleasure" derived from drinking imported tea and contrasted that "trifling . . . Amusement" to the advantages of abandoning the "darling Tea-Dish Ceremony." "Yes Ladies," he asserted, "You have it in your power more than all your committees and Congresses, to strike the Stroke, and make the Hills and Plains of America clap their hands." If women stopped drinking tea, he said, their action would convince the British "that American patriotism extends even to the Fair Sex, and discourage any future Attempts to enslave us." Tea purchased by housewives would "be paid for by the Blood of your Sons," Tennent warned, but if they instead avoided its use, "your Country will rise and called you blessed."⁶

To the female readers of this and other similar patriotic calls to action, the stress upon the vital significance of their participation must have been novel and refreshing. For women to be told, even in an obvious hyperbole, that their activities could be more important to America's future than the efforts of male committees and congresses, represented an extraordinary departure from the past American devaluation of the feminine role. Consequently, one can understand the possible psychological as well as political motivations for women's abstention from the use of tea.

In their verses, female poets demonstrated a clear comprehension of the political implications of the nonconsumption movement. "Farewell the Tea Board, with its gaudy Equipage," wrote one whose words were published in the *Virginia Gazette* in early 1774, "because I'm taught (and I believe it true) / Its use will fasten slavish Chains upon my country." Hannah Griffiths, a Pennsylvania Quaker who

later became a loyalist, called upon her fellow countrywomen in similar terms:

*Then — for the sake of Freedom's Name,
Since British Wisdom scorns repealing,
Come — sacrifice to Patriot fame,
And give up Tea — by way of healing.*

Still another woman, effectively using maternal imagery, accused men of being "kept by a Sugar-Plumb . . . Supinely asleep" and trumpeted,

*Let the Daughters of Liberty, nobly arise,
And tho' we've no Voice, but a negative here,
The use of the Taxables, let us forbear.*

She urged her female compatriots: "Stand firmly resolved and bid Grenville to see / That rather than Freedom, we'll part with our Tea." And she had another purpose as well: "Thus acting — we point out their Duty to men." To her, then, American women were leading the struggle against parliamentary policy; although men might be "strip'd of their Freedom, and rob'd of their Right," women would never surrender to British tyranny.⁷

Many female Americans responded enthusiastically to these powerful appeals to their patriotism. One night in early July 1774 John Adams's landlady would not serve him tea, even though he requested some that had been "honestly smuggled, or paid no Duties." A sick woman in Salem, Massachusetts, refused on principle to drink tea, despite the fact that local committees readily granted exemptions from the boycott to those who were ill. And Pamela Dwight's mother, Abigail, all of whose friends would take "not a Drop of Tea," attributed her indisposition in June 1769 to the novel practice of "Drinking strong Coffee in the Afternoon" on social visits.⁸

In a marked departure from the tradition of feminine noninvolvement in public affairs, women occasionally formalized their agreements not to purchase or consume imported tea. Most notably, the *Boston Evening Post* reported in February 1770 that more than three hundred "Mistresses of Families" had promised to "totally abstain"

from the use of tea, "Sickness excepted." Their statement showed that they understood the meaning of their acts: the women spoke of their desire to "save this abused Country from Ruin and Slavery" at a time when their "invaluable Rights and Privileges are attacked in an unconstitutional and most alarming Manner." In the South, groups of women went even further by associating themselves generally with nonimportation policies, not confining their attention to the tea issue alone. The meeting satirized in the famous British cartoon of the so-called Edenton Ladies' Tea Party fell into this category. The agreement signed in October 1774 by fifty-one female North Carolinians — among them two sisters and a cousin of Hannah Johnston Iredell — did not mention tea. Instead, the women declared their "sincere adherence" to the resolves of the provincial congress and proclaimed it their "duty" to do "every thing as far as lies in our power" to support the "publick good."⁹

This apparently simple statement had unprecedented implications. The Edenton women were not only asserting their right to acquiesce in political measures, but they were also taking upon themselves a "duty" to work for the common good. Never before had female Americans formally shouldered the responsibility of a public role, never before had they claimed a voice — even a compliant one — in public policy. Accordingly, the Edenton statement marked an important turning point in American women's political perceptions, signaling the start of a process through which they would eventually come to regard themselves as participants in the polity rather than as females with purely private concerns.

Yet the North Carolina meeting and the change it embodied aroused amusement among men. The same tongue-in-cheek attitude evident in the satirical drawing of the grotesque "Ladies" was voiced by the Englishman Arthur Iredell in a letter to his emigrant brother James. He had read about the Edenton agreement in the newspapers, Arthur wrote, inquiring whether his sister-in-law Hannah's relatives were involved in the protest. "Is there a Female Congress at Edenton too?" he continued. "I hope not," for "Ladies . . . have ever, since the Amazonian Era, been esteemed the most formidable Enemies." If they choose to attack men, "each wound They give is Mortal. . . . The more we strive to conquer them, the more are Conquerd!"¹⁰



SOCIETY OF PATRIOTIC LADIES.

The Edenton Ladies' Tea Party, as viewed by a British cartoonist. Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints Division.

Iredell thus transformed a serious political gesture that must have been full of meaning for the participants into an occasion for a traditional reference to women's covert power over men. Like many of his male contemporaries, he dismissed the first stirrings of political awareness among American women as a joke, refusing to recognize the ways in which their concept of their role was changing. In an Englishman, such blindness was understandable, but the similar failure of perception among American men must be attributed to a resolute insistence that females remain in their proper place. The male leaders of the boycott movement needed feminine cooperation, but they wanted to set the limits of women's activism. They did not expect, or approve, signs of feminine autonomy.

Nowhere was this made clearer than in a well-known exchange between Abigail and John Adams. As was noted in chapter 2, Abigail asked her husband in March 1776 to ensure that the new nation's legal code included protection for wives against the "Naturally Tyrannical" tendencies of their spouses. In reply John declared, "I cannot but laugh" at "your extraordinary Code of Laws." Falling back upon the same cliché employed by Arthur Iredell, he commented, "[O]ur Masculine systems . . . are little more than Theory. . . . In Practice you know We are the subjects. We have only the Name of Masters."¹¹ Adams, like Iredell, failed to come to terms with the implications of the issues raised by the growing interest in politics among colonial women. He could deal with his wife's display of independent thought only by refusing to take it seriously.

American men's inability to perceive the alterations that were occurring in their womenfolk's self-conceptions was undoubtedly heightened by the superficially conventional character of feminine contributions to the protest movement. Women participating in the boycott simply made different decisions about what items to purchase and consume; they did not move beyond the boundaries of the feminine sphere. Likewise, when colonial leaders began to emphasize the importance of producing homespun as a substitute for English cloth, they did not ask women to take on an "unfeminine" task: quite the contrary, for spinning was the very role symbolic of femininity itself. But once the context had changed, so too did women's understanding of the meaning of their traditional tasks.

Because the pattern of home manufactures in the colonies showed considerable regional variation, differences also appeared in Americans' responses to calls for expanded domestic cloth production. In the plantation South, which had long been heavily dependent on imported cloth, home manufactures did not readily take hold. Planters were reluctant to reassign female slaves from field work to spinning and weaving, believing both that the change would be expensive and that, as a North Carolinian declared during a 1775 congressional debate on nonimportation, the women were "best employed about Tobacco." Consequently, it was not until late 1774 and early 1775 that planters acquiesced in the inevitable and began to establish large-scale cloth manufactories on their lands.¹²

The beginnings of the new era were noted by John Harrower, the tutor indentured to the Daingerfield family in Virginia, when he recorded in his journal in October 1775 that slaves had started to process the first crop of flax grown on the plantation in order to make "coarse linnen for Shirts to the Nigers. . . . Before this year," he continued, "there has been little or no linnen made in the Colony." The accuracy of Harrower's observation is confirmed by the contents of Robert Carter's daybooks and letterbooks. Carter decided in the fall of 1774 that the nonimportation agreement would require "all people here, who have slaves & plantations, to make clouthng for their Negroes & Families." He accordingly purchased large quantities of hemp and flax seed, made extensive notes on the manufacture of thread and cloth (including estimating the amount of work that reasonably could be expected from spinners and weavers), and began to buy the equipment his slaves would need — spinning wheels, woolen cards, hatchels for flax and hemp.¹³ In early 1775 Carter directed his overseers to "sett a part, Ten black Females the most Expert spinners belonging to me — they to be Employed in Spinning, solely" in renovated tobacco storage sheds. Only a year later the planter had already discovered that this work force was insufficient, and so he ordered that another six girls be taught to spin. At the end of the war Carter was employing ten weavers, four of them women, and twelve female spinners at the "Linnen and Woolen Factory" on his Aries quarter.¹⁴

The shift to home manufacturing in the South was undeniably successful. In 1778, a Virginia merchant reported that his neighbors

were "manufactoring so much of the necessary wear that the demand will be but triffling till a change of times & Measures," and a year later a visitor noted that in Virginia spinning was now "the chief employment of the female negroes." Planters in the Carolinas and Georgia likewise made an extensive commitment to the domestic production of cloth.¹⁵ After the war, white southerners continued to use skilled black female spinners and weavers until machine-made American textiles became available following the War of 1812. In the words of Rolla Tryon, the scholar who has studied the subject most fully, "The Revolution changed the South from a region depending almost wholly upon the outside world for manufactured commodities to one in which many of such commodities were made by the people in their homes or in their plantations."¹⁶

One can only speculate about the effect of this change on female slaves, for no records of their reactions to the new circumstances have been located. But assignments to spinning and weaving factories must have been coveted, if only because the work was less physically demanding than field labor. Furthermore, the manufactories afforded women the opportunity to learn demanding skills comparable to those of male artisans. Planters soon discovered that not all women could spin equally well, and they came to place the same special value on the more practiced female spinners and weavers that they did on experienced blacksmiths and carpenters. In a study of Virginia run-aways, Gerald Mullin has argued persuasively that the acquisition of artisan skills led to the development of greater independence and self-confidence among male slaves. Although he does not apply his theory to women, the same reasoning would seem pertinent. It is highly unlikely that the approximately forty-year period during which large numbers of black women had the chance to become skilled workers was without impact on their individual and collective consciousness.¹⁷

Farther north, home manufactures had to be increased by persuasion, not by giving orders to slaves. Political leaders had to convince individual adult white women, and especially their daughters, of the importance of producing more homespun. In the process the men were forced to reevaluate the importance of a crucial component of the feminine domestic role. One of the most common, and indeed most tedious, household tasks took on a high social and political value for the first time. Again, men did not anticipate the consequences.

Initially, the authors of newspaper articles recommending an expansion of home manufactures did not single out women for special attention. Instead, the calls for domestic industry published between 1766 and 1768 emphasized the achievements of households or cited the examples of entire towns. Thus a Newport resident was praised for the 369½ yards of cloth and the 300 skeins of yarn that were "spun in his own house" during a thirty-month period, and a New Jersey man was applauded for the fact that he "has within the year past manufactured in his own family 580 yards of linen and woollen cloth." In neither case, nor in many other such notices, was there any mention of the fact that all of the spinning and weaving in question would have been done by women.¹⁸

But this neglect did not continue beyond the end of 1768, for, as a writer in the *Providence Gazette* had noted late the previous year, "[W]e must after all our efforts depend greatly upon the female sex for the introduction of oeconomy among us." The first months of 1769 brought an explosion in the newspaper coverage of women's activities, especially in New England. Stories about spinning bees, which had been both rare and relegated to back pages, suddenly became numerous and prominently featured. The *Boston Evening Post*, which carried only one previous account of female domestic industry, printed twenty-eight articles on the subject between May and December 1769, and devoted most of its front page on May 29 to an enumeration of these examples of female patriotism. The editor prefaced his extensive treatment of women's endeavors with an enthusiastic assessment of their significance: "[T]he industry and frugality of American ladies must exalt their character in the Eyes of the World and serve to show how greatly they are contributing to bring about the political salvation of a whole Continent."¹⁹

It is impossible to know whether the increased coverage of spinning bees in 1769 indicated that women's activities expanded at precisely that time, or whether the more lengthy, detailed, and numerous stories merely represented the printers' new interest in such efforts. But one fact is unquestionable: the ritualized gatherings attended by women often termed Daughters of Liberty carried vital symbolic meaning both to the participants and to the editors who reported their accomplishments.

The meetings, or at least the descriptions of them, fell into a uniform pattern. Early in the morning, a group of eminently respectable young ladies (sometimes as many as one hundred, but normally twenty to forty), all of them dressed in homespun, would meet at the home of the local minister. There they would spend the day at their wheels, all the while engaging in enlightening conversation. When they stopped to eat, they had "American produce prepared which was more agreeable to them than any foreign Dainties and Delicacies," and, of course, they drank local herbal tea. At nightfall, they would present their output to the clergyman, who might then deliver a sermon on an appropriate theme. For example, the Reverend Jedidiah Jewell, of Rowley, Massachusetts, preached from Romans 12:2, "Not slothful in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord," and the Reverend John Cleaveland of Ipswich told the seventy-seven spinners gathered at his house, "[T]he women might recover to this country the full and free enjoyment of all our rights, properties and privileges (which is more than the men have been able to do)" by consuming only American produce and manufacturing their own clothes.²⁰

The entire community became involved in the women's activities. Large numbers of spectators — Ezra Stiles estimated that six hundred persons watched the bee held at his house in 1769 — encouraged the spinners in their work, supplied them with appropriate American foodstuffs, and sometimes provided entertainment. The occasional adoption of a match format, in which the women competed against each other in quality and quantity, must have further spurred their industry. And they must have gloried in being the center of attention, if only for the day. In reporting a Long Island spinning bee, the *Boston Evening Post* captured the spirit of the occasion with an expression of hope that "the ladies, while they vie with each other in skill and industry in their profitable employment, may vie with the men in contributing to the preservation and prosperity of their country and equally share in the honor of it."²¹

"Equally share in the honor of it": the idea must have been exceedingly attractive to any eighteenth-century American woman raised in an environment that had previously devalued both her and her domestic sphere. Those involved in the home manufacture move-

ment therefore took great pride in their newfound status, demonstrating that fact unequivocally when satirical essayists cast aspersions on their character.

Late in 1767, "Mr. Squibo" of Boston joked that the spinners were so patriotic they consumed only "New-England Rum . . . the principal and almost only manufacture of this country." Shortly thereafter, "A Young American" hinted that women discussed only "such trifling subjects as Dress, Scandal and Detraction" during their spinning bees. Three female Bostonians responded angrily to both letters, which they declared had "scandalously insulted" American women. Denying that gossip engrossed their thoughts or that rum filled their glasses, they pronounced themselves so committed to the patriot cause that they would even endure the unmerited ridicule of "the little wits and foplings of the present day" in order to continue their efforts. "Inferior in abusive sarcasm, in personal invective, in low wit, we glory to be," they concluded; "but inferior in veracity, honesty, sincerity, love of virtue, of liberty and of our country, we would not willingly be to any." Significantly, the Bostonians made a special point of noting that women had been "addressed as persons of consequence, in the present oeconomical regulations." They thereby revealed the novelty and importance of that designation in their own minds. Having become established as "persons of consequence" in American society, women would not relinquish that position without a fight.²²

The formal spinning groups had a value more symbolic than real. They do not seem to have met regularly, and in most cases their output appears to have been donated to the clergyman for his personal use. The women might not even have consistently called themselves Daughters of Liberty, for many newspaper accounts did not employ that phrase at all. But if the actual production of homespun did not motivate the meetings, they were nonetheless purposeful. The public attention focused on organized spinning bees helped to dramatize the pleas for industry and frugality in colonial households, making a political statement comparable to men's ostentatious wearing of homespun on public occasions during the same years. The spinning bees were ideological showcases: they were intended to convince American women that they could render essential contributions to the struggle against Britain, and to encourage them to engage in increased cloth

production in the privacy of their own homes. Sometimes the newspaper accounts made this instructional function quite explicit. The fact that many of the participants came from "as good families as any in town," one editor remarked, showed that "it was no longer a disgrace for one of our fair sex to be caught at a spinning wheel."²³ Women's private papers provide confirmations of the success of the campaign.

"The plan laid down for our education was entirely broken in upon by the War," the Virginian Betsy Ambler Brent recalled late in life. "Instead of Morning Lessons, we were to knit Stockings, instead of embroidering to make up home spun garments." Betsy's contemporary, the eleven-year-old Boston resident Anna Winslow, learned to spin, termed herself "a daughter of liberty," and declared, "I chuse to wear as much of our own manufactory as plicable." Sukey DeLancey, the youngest of the well-to-do New York sisters, also began to spin, and Betsy Foote, the Connecticut farm girl whose ordinary chores included spinning and weaving, found her tasks invested with new significance. In October 1775 she proudly recorded in her diary that she had carded all day, then spun ten knots of wool in the evening, "& felt Nationly into the bargain."²⁴

Charity Clarke, a New York City teenager who eagerly knitted "stockens" from homespun yarn supplied by a friend, showed in letters to an English cousin that she too "felt Nationly." Warning him that, although "Heroines may not distinguish themselves at the head of an Army," women could still contribute to the defense of colonial liberties, she set forth her vision of a "new arcadia." There "a fighting army of amazones . . . armed with spinning wheels" would be attended by men "who shall all learn to weave, & keep sheep." Together, she said, the Americans would "retire beyond the reach of arbitrary power, cloathed with the work of our own hands, & feeding on what the country affords." If Britons like himself believed that the colonies were dependent on imported goods, she declared, they were badly mistaken. In 1774 Clarke asserted staunchly, "[Y]ou cannot deprive us [of our property], the arms that supports my family shall defend it, though this body is not clad with silken garments, these limbs are armed with strength, the Soul is fortified by Virtue, and the Love of Liberty is cherished within this bosom."²⁵

But despite her political fervor, Charity Clarke worried about how her cousin would react to her words. Perhaps they would change "the Idea you should have of female softness in me," she told him worriedly in late 1769. Politics as a subject was "out of my province," she admitted, and so she felt uneasy about expressing her opinions, though, she asserted, "I cannot help them, nor can I by any means think them seditious."²⁶ In her hesitancy Clarke resembled her female compatriots. Like her, they discovered by the late 1760s that the new role they had assumed brought them into conflict with one of the primary limitations on the feminine sphere: their exclusion from the world of politics. In the chaos of the revolutionary period they accordingly began the process of developing an innovative conception of their relationship to the public realm.

II

Before the mid-1760s, most men and women accepted without question the standard dictum that political discussion, like direct political participation, fell outside the feminine sphere. As Esther Burr observed in 1755, "[T]he Men say . . . that Women have no business to concern themselves about em [politics] but trust to those that know better." Accordingly, when such issues became (in the words of Sally Logan Fisher) "the prevailing topic of Conversation," women found themselves in a quandary. They all agreed that political discussion was "not our province," yet at the same time, Sarah Franklin told her father in the fall of 1765, "[N]othing else is talked of, the Dutch talk of the stompt ack the Negroes of the tamp, in short every body has something to say." Were women to deny themselves the ability to comment on what a New Englander called "the most animating Subject," one that "Concerns us all"?²⁷

In 1777, Anne Emlen addressed precisely that question in a reflective essay in her commonplace book. "How shall I impose a silence upon myself when the subject is so very interesting, so much engrossing Conversation — & what every Member of the Community is more or less concerned in?" she inquired rhetorically, admitting that at times she felt an overwhelming desire to express her opinion on public

affairs. In the end, she asked God "[for] prudence, divine prudence, which may prove a stay to my mind & a bridle to my tongue." Other women developed different resolutions of the same conflict. Some, like a Virginia loyalist, indulged in political analysis while simultaneously denying that they did so. "Dont think I am engaging in politics," Elizabeth Feilde wrote in 1776 in the midst of an astute conservative commentary on current events. "No; I assure you its a subject for which I have not either Talents or Inclination to enter upon." More commonly, women simply punctuated their political discussions with apologies. Anne Clark Hooper, a niece of Elizabeth Murray Inman who lived in North Carolina, declared in 1768 that she included politics in her letters only because "its being so much talked of here." And Annis Boudinot Stockton likewise explained her fascination with public affairs: "[T]ho a female I was born a patriot and cant help it If I would."²⁸

As the years passed and women more frequently engaged in political discourse, the apologies tended to disappear. Simultaneously, men began to change their minds about women's political capacities. The transition can be seen clearly in the correspondence of Samuel Adams and his wife, Betsy. Early in 1776 Samuel "for once" included a "political anecdote" in a letter to her. Later that same year, prefacing his remarks with the accurate observation, "it has not been usual for me to write to you of War or Politicks," Samuel nevertheless transmitted the most recent political and military news because he knew, he said, "how deeply you have always interested your self in the Welfare of our Country." Although in 1780 he was still wondering whether he should "trouble" her with his reflections on public affairs, the following year he formally challenged the conventional outlines of the feminine sphere by declaring, "I see no Reason why a Man may not communicate his political opinions to his wife, if he pleases."²⁹

By 1783, wartime circumstances had created a generation of women who, like the North Carolinian Elizabeth Steele, described themselves as "great politician[s]." Several years after the event, Eliza Wilkinson, a resident of the South Carolina sea islands, recalled that during the British invasion of her state in 1780 "none were greater politicians than the several knots of ladies, who met together. All trifling discourse of fashions, and such low chat was thrown by, and we com-

menced perfect statesmen." Women read newspapers and pamphlets as eagerly as their male counterparts, repeatedly asked their husbands to keep them supplied with accurate information on military affairs, and followed the progress of war and diplomacy throughout the world, not just on the American continent.³⁰ Even girls were affected. Nelly Blair and Anna Winslow learned to differentiate between Whigs and Tories; before she reached the age of ten Betsy Ambler had decided that Lord Dunmore, Virginia's last royal governor, was "despicable"; and over the course of a six-month period in 1774 Jemima Condict advanced from a belief that the dispute with Britain was a "trifling" one over tea to the conviction that the English were bent on "our destruction." Young women's correspondence, previously filled solely with social chitchat, began to contain political commentary, just like the letters written by their older female relatives.³¹

Interest in public affairs and partisan commitments were not confined to women of the middling and better sorts. In 1774, a Boston seamstress firmly aligned herself with the "libe[r]ty boys" against what she called the "tyranny [that] rides in our harbour and insults us in our fields and streets." Travelers regularly encountered politically committed landladies, and British prisoners of war found themselves verbally and sometimes physically assaulted by female Americans. The Baroness Frederica von Riedesel, wife of one of the Hessian officers who served with Burgoyne, recorded in the journal of her travels with the captured troops vivid portrayals of poor patriot women who only grudgingly (if at all) gave food and shelter to "the royalist dogs." At one house, a mother insisted upon combing the lice out of her children's hair while the von Riedesels were eating; at another, they were refused even the slaves' cornmeal, being told by the mistress, "[I]f you die of hunger, so much the better"; at a third, a teenaged girl proclaimed that she would like to tear out George III's heart, "fry it over these coals, and eat it."³²

Loyalist women from all social ranks were no less firmly committed to their political position. The letters Christian Barnes wrote to her friend Elizabeth Murray Smith in the late 1760s and early 1770s not only showed her fidelity to Great Britain but also revealed the unpleasant consequences of her political views. In late 1769 she told Smith, who was then in England, "[T]hese daring Sons of Libberty are now at the tip top of their Power and to transact any thing

contrary to their Sentiments or even to speak disrespectfully of the well disposed, is a Crime equal to high Treason." Christian's husband, Henry, nevertheless resisted all efforts to force him to comply with the nonimportation agreement. As a result, the Barnes's coach was vandalized, he was twice hanged in effigy, a wagonload of merchandise destined for their store was attacked, and they were sent an "incendiary" threatening letter. Yet the persecution did not cause Christian Barnes to retreat from her opposition to "such a set of wretches whose only aim is to delude the multitude by false representations." She and other women steadfastly retained their loyalty to Great Britain, despite having their property plundered and enduring insults and physical abuse.³³

That political allegiance had come to be of major importance to American women was demonstrated by the large number of friendships broken by divergent beliefs. Mrs. Barnes learned in the summer of 1768 that one of her close friends had "become a violent advocate in the Cause of Libberty." For a time, Christian managed to avoid "warm disputes" by remaining closemouthed about her own opinions, but by the summer of 1770 the split between them was irrevocable. The same pattern repeated itself throughout the colonies. In New York City, Helena Kortwright Brasher recalled in later years, the "most intimate friends became the most inveterate enemies." In St. Augustine, a woman reported in 1774, "[T]he Party work that has prevailed here for some time, has almost put an end to what Society was among the few Ladys that remained here." Two years earlier, a lack of partisan divisions in Boston was so unusual even on social occasions that Elizabeth Murray Smith made a special point of telling an English relative that, at her marriage to Ralph Inman, "their [*sic*] was neither Whig nor torry but every one joind to make the day & evening compleatly agreeable."³⁴

Marriages, too, broke under the strain of political differences. That of Elizabeth Graeme, the wealthy Philadelphia heiress, and Henry Hugh Fergusson, a penniless Scottish immigrant fourteen years her junior, might have seemed ill-fated from its outset in 1772, especially because her father's opposition forced them to marry in secret. Nevertheless, according to contemporary observers, their marital problems "arose originally from the Difference of Political Opinion." The loyalist Henry left Philadelphia for his homeland in 1775. When he

returned two years later with the occupying British troops, the Fergussons made an abortive attempt at reconciliation, but each remained politically adamant. In the 1780s, although he asked her to join him in England (since the United States would not allow him to return), she refused on the grounds that both her "Principles and Interest is on the Side of America." Elizabeth's bitterness was magnified by the fact that her property had been confiscated by the government of Pennsylvania because of her husband's loyalism. Only after years of effort did she and her friends persuade the legislature to adopt a private bill reversing the confiscation. Mrs. Fergusson spent her last decades sorrowfully reflecting on her situation, expressing herself through poetic criticism of those who

*Deem Woman made alone for mans Control,
Like Mahomets fair ones void of noble Soul
As Birds or Insects for a Boy to please
They torturd Subjects made [for] their Lords to teize.³⁵*

The same partisanship that led to broken marriages and friendships also caused women to take active roles in the conflict. Camp followers like the woman called Molly Pitcher are today the most famous of the female activists, yet it is impossible to know whether those wives who followed their spouses to the armies of both sides were merely deprived of alternative means of support by their husbands' enlistments, or whether their participation in the war may be attributed to their own political beliefs. When women acted independently, on the other hand, one can be fairly certain they did so out of political conviction. Innumerable anecdotes recount the exploits of such female patriots as Deborah Sampson, who disguised herself as a man to fight in the revolutionary army; Nancy Hart, the Georgian who single-handedly captured a group of Tories; Patience Wright, Lydia Daragh, and other spies; and teenaged messengers like Emily Gieger and Deborah Champion.³⁶ Such well-known tales dramatically reveal a few women's intense commitment, but they provide no basis for estimating the extent of female partisan activity. By studying the 468 claims submitted by loyalist refugee women, though, one can gain a better idea of the proportion of activists and of the ways in which they contributed to their chosen side.

Paul Smith has argued persuasively that about 15 percent of adult white male loyalists took up arms for the British cause. The percentage of activist women was significantly smaller: only twenty-six, or 5.5 percent, of the female refugees said that they had directly assisted the British. Of these, some of whom contributed in more than one way, six aided loyalists, nine helped British soldiers (including those being held as prisoners of war), six carried letters through the lines, and eight served as spies. In addition, two women from upstate New York worked to prevent the Iroquois from allying themselves with the rebels.³⁷

Although their numbers were limited, the women's participation required a strong sense of commitment. Unlike men, they could not be drafted into service or forced to take an active role through peer pressure. Their work was both entirely voluntary and extremely dangerous, since it was almost always performed behind the American lines. The most accurate comparison to them would be the percentage of men who had engaged in clandestine activities, but that figure is obviously unobtainable.

Three examples will illustrate the types of contributions made by female loyalists. In Philadelphia, the milliner Margaret Hutchinson "Releive'd at her own Exspence [*sic*], Severall English prisoners" who were jailed in the city early in the war. During the British occupation of 1777-1778, since her business often required her to leave the city, she was employed by Sir William Howe's aide-de-camp to carry letters to and from British spies among the rebel forces. She also brought back "Verbal Intelligence, of what, she had seen, of their different Movements." The Charleston shopkeeper Elizabeth Thompson likewise began by aiding prisoners, but she later became as bold as Mrs. Hutchinson. On one occasion she traveled through the American camp at night to carry letters to the redcoats, and on another she drove her chaise past the rebel lines, with a disguised British officer as a passenger, so he could "View their works in order to inform the British Commander." The New Yorker Lorenda Holmes, whose aunt also worked on behalf of the British, carried messages to and from the invading royal forces in the summer of 1776. Caught by some rebel committeemen and denounced as "the Damned Tory the penny Post," she was stripped naked and exposed to the mob but, she noted, "received no wounds or bruises from them only shame and

horror of the mind." Some months later, though, after she had helped a group of loyalists slip through the lines into New York City, a rebel troop retaliated by holding her right foot on some hot coals until it was badly burned.³⁸

To argue that the politicization and partisanship which led to the fervor of Lorenda Holmes, Elizabeth Thompson, and others was common among women is not to contend that it was universal. After all, the vast majority of female loyalist claimants gave no indication that they had taken positive steps on behalf of the British cause. To be sure, many of them fled their homes at an early stage of the conflict and so could not have contributed actively to the war effort, but some evidence suggests that for many women home and family remained the sole concern throughout the period of the war.

Such a conclusion emerges from an examination of the pension petitions submitted in the 1830s and 1840s by the elderly widows of Revolutionary War soldiers. In order to receive their stipends, the women had to present proof of their husbands' service in the American army. Since most of them had long since lost whatever documentary evidence they might once have possessed, they were forced to rely heavily on their memories. And how did they date their husbands' military careers? Not by reference to the great events of the Revolution, but rather by their familial circumstances at the time. The former Connecticut resident Nancy Davis recalled in 1841 that her first husband, Abner Lee, had enlisted in the army when their son was about six months old; a Rhode Islander who had been married in late 1780 declared that her husband was called up for militia service eleven months later, "which she remembers on account of her confinement which took place at that time"; and Anna Lawson, who "states she is no schollar and can not keep the date and is now governed by the time of her marriage," estimated that her husband, John, first served in the army six years after their 1775 wedding, because she then had three children.³⁹

The same domestic flavor permeated the recollections of Helena Kortwright Brasher. When she described the prewar years in private memoirs prepared for her children, Helena disclosed her resentment of her husband's revolutionary activism, even though her "politicks were the same as his." Their father had often said, "[M]y country first and then my family," Helena explained, but "in this we differed.

I thought a mans family should and ought to be his first object." She then admitted, "[I] frequently, perhaps peevishly, complained of his neglecting me and our children." The situation was even worse because "he had formerly been a most domestick man," with the family as "his sole care and pleasure in which all his happiness centered." By the early 1770s, though, "he was forever out or had his house surrounded with gentlemen conversing on politicks; every evening out at some meeting or other haranguing his fellow citizens, writing for the publick prints."⁴⁰

Mrs. Brasher's memoirs reveal her alienation from the political world that so captivated the attention of some of her contemporaries, both such girls as Charity Clarke and such mature women as Eliza Wilkinson. There must have been many others like her, women who had no desire to assume public roles and who stressed private values even in the midst of revolution. But those who adhered wholly to the traditional domestic realm were anomalous. The change in women's political perceptions wrought by revolutionary circumstances was truly momentous. For the first time, women became active — if not equal — participants in discourse on public affairs and in endeavors that carried political significance. As they discussed politics with men and among themselves during the twenty years from the mid-1760s to the mid-1780s, they gained both sophistication in political analysis and a new sense of their own role — one they expressed most fully in the summer of 1780 when they attempted to form a nationwide organization.

III

Charleston, South Carolina, fell to besieging British forces on May 12, 1780, striking a heavy blow to American hopes for an end to the war in the foreseeable future. Galvanized into action by the disaster, Philadelphia merchants and government officials took steps to support the inflated Pennsylvania currency and began soliciting funds for enlistment bounties to pay new army recruits. In this time of crisis their wives and daughters too adopted "public spirited measures," to use the words of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*: they signaled their inten-

tion to found the first large-scale women's association in American history.⁴¹

In the eleven years since the peak of the activities of the Daughters of Liberty, female Americans had not engaged in organized support of the war effort. Some women had published their opinions on revolutionary events, but these had all been individual endeavors. Even when "Clarissa" described her "Vision of the Paradise of Female Patriotism" in the *United States Magazine* in 1779, she wrote only of a "delicious garden" in which American women strolled beside the heroines of the past rather than of a world in which her contemporaries contributed as energetically to the welfare of their country as had the women she cited as exemplars — Deborah, Miriam, Portia (the wife of Brutus), Boadicea, and Joan of Arc.⁴² The activism displayed by the Philadelphia women just over a year later was of a different order of magnitude altogether. Recognizing that the American soldiers were suffering from a serious loss of morale in the aftermath of the fall of Charleston, the women proposed a nationwide relief effort to aid the hard-pressed troops.

The campaign began on June 10, 1780, with the publication of a broadside, *The Sentiments of an American Woman*. The broadside was composed by the thirty-three-year-old Esther DeBerdt Reed, who was to become president of the Ladies Association. The daughter of a prominent English supporter of America, Esther had lived in Pennsylvania only since her 1770 marriage to Joseph Reed, but she was nonetheless a staunch patriot. Her *Sentiments* asserted forcefully that American women were determined to do more than offer "barren wishes" for the success of the army: they wanted to be "really useful," like "those heroines of antiquity, who have rendered their sex illustrious." Recognizing that in proposing an active political role for women she was challenging the boundaries of the feminine sphere, Mrs. Reed built her case carefully.

She began by reviewing the history of women's patriotic activity, referring to female monarchs, Roman matrons, and Old Testament women. Linking herself explicitly to such foremothers, she declared, "I glory in all which my sex has done great and commendable. I call to mind with enthusiasm and with admiration, all those acts of courage, of constancy and patriotism, which history has transmitted to us." Mrs. Reed especially held up Joan of Arc as an appropriate

model, for she had driven from France "the ancestors of these same British, whose odious yoke we have just shaken off, and whom it is necessary that we drive from this Continent."

Esther Reed then addressed the question of propriety. Some men might perhaps "disapprove" women's activity, she admitted. But in the current dismal state of public affairs anyone who raised this objection would not be "a good citizen." Any man who truly understood the soldiers' needs, she wrote, could only "applaud our efforts for the relief of the armies which defend our lives, our possessions, our liberty." By thus hinting that critics of her scheme would be unpatriotic, Mrs. Reed cleverly defused possible traditionalist objections even before they could be advanced.

Finally, she outlined her plan. Recalling the contributions women had made to the nonimportation and home manufacture movements, Esther Reed recommended that female Americans renounce "vain ornaments," donating the money they would no longer spend on extravagant clothing and elaborate hairstyles to the patriot troops as "*the offering of the Ladies*."⁴³

Her appeal drew an immediate response. Three days after the publication of the broadside, thirty-six Philadelphia women met to decide how to implement its suggestions. The results of their deliberations were printed as an appendix to *Sentiments* when it appeared in the June 21 issue of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. Entitled "Ideas, relative to the manner of forwarding to the American Soldiers, the Presents of the American Women," the plan proposed the mobilization of the entire female population. Contributions would be accepted from any woman, in any amount. A "Treasurer" appointed in each county would oversee the collection of money, keeping careful records of all sums received. Heading each state's county treasurers would be the wife of its governor, who would serve as "Treasurer-General." Ultimately, all contributions would be sent to Martha Washington to be used for the benefit of the troops. Only one restriction was placed on the employment of the contributions: "It is an extraordinary bounty intended to render the condition of the soldier more pleasant, and not to hold place of the things which they ought to receive from the Congress, or from the States."⁴⁴

The Philadelphians set to work collecting funds even before the publication of their "Ideas." Dividing the city into ten equal districts,

they assigned between two and five of their number to each area. Traveling in pairs, the canvassers visited every house, requesting contributions from "each woman and girl without any distinction." Among the collectors in the fifth ward, Market to Chestnut Streets, were Sarah Franklin Bache and Anne Willing (Mrs. Tench) Francis, sister of Elizabeth Willing Powel; Julia Stockton (Mrs. Benjamin) Rush worked in district six; and in the eighth ward, Spruce to Pine Streets, the canvassers included Alice Lee Shippen, Mrs. Robert Morris, and Sally McKean, wife of the Pennsylvania chief justice. The fact that women of such social standing undertook the very unfeminine task of soliciting contributions not only from friends and neighbors but also from strangers, poor people, and servants supports the contention of one of the Philadelphians that they "considered it as a great honour" to be invited to serve as canvassers. In a letter to a friend in Annapolis, an anonymous participant declared that "those who were in the country returned without delay to the city to fulfil their duty. Others put off their departure; those whose state of health was the most delicate, found strength in their patriotism." When a nursing mother (who may have been Esther Reed herself) was reluctant to leave her baby, this witness recorded, a friend volunteered to nurse the child along with her own.⁴⁵

Accounts of the women's reception differ. The anonymous letter writer claimed that "as the cause of their visit was known, they were received with all the respect due to so honourable a commission." She explained that no house was omitted, not even those inhabited by Quakers, and that even there the subscription met with success, for "nothing is more easy than to reconcile a beneficent scheme with a beneficent religion." But Anna Rawle's description of the canvass of Quaker homes painted a different picture. "Of all absurdities the Ladies going about for money exceeded everything," she told her mother, Rebecca Shoemaker, whose second husband, Samuel, was a loyalist exile. Sarah Bache had come to their door, Anna reported, but had turned away, saying that "she did not chuse to face Mrs. S. or her daughters." Anna characterized the collectors as "so extremely importunate that people were obliged to give them something to get rid of them." Even "the meanest ale house" did not escape their net, and men were harassed until they contributed in the name of their wives or sweethearts. "I fancy they raised a considerable sum by this

extorted contribution," Anna concluded, but in her opinion the requests were "carried to such an excess of meanness as the nobleness of no cause whatsoever could excuse."⁴⁶

Whether the letter writer's examples of women proudly and voluntarily giving to the cause or Anna Rawle's account of reluctant contributors is more accurate is impossible to determine. But by the time the Philadelphia canvass was completed in early July, more than \$300,000 continental dollars had been collected from over 1600 persons. Because of inflation, this amount when converted to specie equaled only about \$7500, but even that represented a considerable sum. In financial terms, the city canvass was a smashing success.⁴⁷

It was a success in other ways as well, for the Philadelphia women sought and achieved symbolic goals that went far beyond the collection of money. As the anonymous participant put it, the canvassers hoped that the "general beneficent" subscription would "produce the happy effect of destroying *intestine discords*, even to the very last seeds." That endeavor was particularly appropriate for Philadelphia women, because some of their number had become notorious for openly consorting with enemy troops during the British occupation in 1777-1778. The author of the 1780 letter alluded delicately to that questionable conduct when she explained that the canvassers wanted to "give some of our female fellow citizens an opportunity of relinquishing former errors and of avowing a change of sentiments by their contributions to the general cause of liberty and their country."⁴⁸

But the symbolism of the fund drive was national as well as local. The anonymous participant stressed that through their gifts American women would "greatly promote the public cause, and blast the hopes of the enemies of this country" by demonstrating the populace's unanimous support of the war. That others also viewed the women's efforts in this light is evident from newspaper comments on the Ladies Association. As early as June 27, a laudatory essay signed "Song of Debora" appeared in the *Pennsylvania Packet*. "It must strike the enemy as with an apoplexy, to be informed, that the women of America are attentive to the wants of the Soldiery," the author declared, arguing, "[I]t is not the quantity of the money that may be collected, but the idea of favour and affection discovered in this exertion, that will principally give life to our cause, and restore our

affairs." Urging other women to copy the Philadelphians' example, she predicted that "the women will reinspire the war; and ensure, finally, victory and peace."⁴⁹

In July, newspapers throughout the country reprinted *Sentiments*, usually accompanied by the detailed collection plan, and editors occasionally added exhortations of their own to the women's call for action. Thus the *Continental Journal* of Boston declared on July 13, "[I]f ever an Army deserved every Encouragement from the Country it protects, it is that of America: And nothing could make a deeper Impression on the Minds of those brave men, . . . than such a Mark of Gratitude, and Regard, as is proposed from the FAIRER HALF of the United States." Praising the Philadelphians, the editor went on to assert confidently that "it cannot be doubted that the Ladies of New-England will exhibit the same amiable Disposition, and an equal alacrity in promoting the cause of their Country." The symbolic importance of the subscription was likewise conveyed to the nation by a frequently reprinted "Letter from an Officer at Camp, dated June 29, 1780." The patriotism of Philadelphia women "is a subject of conversation with the army," the officer wrote. "We do not suppose that these contributions can be any stable support to the campaign for any length of time; but, as it is a mark of respect to the army, it has given particular satisfaction, and it may be a great temporary service," for the soldiers had felt themselves "neglected" and forgotten by their fellow citizens.⁵⁰

Successful as this publicity was in spreading the news of the Philadelphians' plan, Esther Reed and her fellow organizers did not rely solely upon print as they sought to involve other women in their association. The anonymous participant told her Annapolis friend that after they completed the city collections the women decided to write circular letters to their acquaintances in other counties and towns: "[W]e have it in charge to keep up this correspondence until the whole subscription shall be completed." Despite their inexperience, the Philadelphians demonstrated considerable organizational expertise by taking explicit steps to avoid having more than one member contact persons in the same area and by providing for meticulous record keeping. Sarah Franklin Bache, for example, was given the responsibility for correspondence with Bethlehem, German-

town, and Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Esther Reed's task, as befitted her position, was to write to the wives of the governors. Explaining that the purpose of the group was to reward the soldiers "for their Hardships & their Virtue," she enclosed a copy of the plan with her circular letter to the governors' wives, "not doubting your Interest & Influence to carry it into execution through your State."⁵¹

The women of Trenton, New Jersey, were the first to copy the Philadelphians' lead. As early as June 28 they began to organize their own subscription campaign, and on July 4 at a general meeting they outlined plans for a statewide association. As the "Ideas" had suggested, they appointed a treasurers and they also named Mary Dagworthy as corresponding secretary. Ambitiously, they proposed to establish coordinating committees in each county, and when they announced their scheme in the newspapers they published "Sentiments of a Lady in New Jersey" in deliberate imitation of the Philadelphians. "Let us animate one another to contribute from our purses in proportion to our circumstances towards the support and comfort of the brave men who are fighting and suffering for us on the field," the author exhorted her female compatriots. Although the final accounts of the New Jersey campaign have evidently failed to survive, in mid-July Dagworthy forwarded nearly \$15,500 to George Washington as an initial contribution to the fund.⁵²

Maryland women also responded quickly to the Philadelphians' request. Mrs. Thomas Sim Lee, the wife of the governor, wrote to friends in each county to ask them to serve as treasurers, and by July 14 the organization was actively soliciting money in Annapolis. In that city alone, even though many residents had left town for the summer, more than \$16,000 in currency was collected, with additional sums in specie. In Baltimore, the merchant and revolutionary leader Samuel Purviance welcomed the formation of the association, since, he told a friend, "[I] have for 3 years past been engaged in a continual Warfare against the exorbitant Follies of my Fair Countrywomen." Samuel's wife, Katherine, was initially selected as local treasurers of what he termed "this Amazonian Society," but she declined the post, largely because, her husband explained, "her health [is] such as will prevent her taking the Field this Camp[aign]." Some months later, writing with particular reference to the Marylanders, the editor of the

Pennsylvania Packet rhapsodized that "the women of every part of the globe are under obligations to those of America, for having shown that females are capable of the highest political virtue."⁵³

Only for one other state, Virginia, is there evidence of successful activity connected with the Ladies Association. Martha Wayles Jefferson, whose husband, Thomas, was then the governor, received a copy of the Philadelphians' plan directly from Martha Washington. Since she was in poor health, Mrs. Jefferson decided to encourage her friends to take part but not to assume an active role herself. Interestingly enough, the letter she wrote on August 8 to Eleanor Madison, a copy of which also made its way into the hands of Frances Bland Tucker, is the sole piece of her correspondence extant today. In it she asserted, "I undertake with cheerfulness the duty of furnishing to my countrywomen an opportunity of proving that they also participate of those virtuous feelings" of patriotism. The following day a public announcement of the campaign appeared in the *Virginia Gazette*. Given the diffuse pattern of settlement in the state, a house-to-house solicitation would have been impossible, so the plan specified that collections would be made in the churches. Only fragmentary records have ever been located, but they indicate that county treasurers gathered total currency contributions ranging from £1,560 (Albemarle) to \$7,506 (Prince William). Among the donors was Rebecca Burwell Ambler, mother of Betsy Ambler Brent and Polly Ambler Marshall.⁵⁴

The association's organizing efforts in other states seem to have failed not because of lack of will or interest but because of lack of financial resources. That, at least, was the message conveyed to the Philadelphians by some of their out-of-state correspondents. Hannah Lee Corbin, a Virginia widow, told her sister, Alice Shippen, "The scheme of raising money for the Soldiers would be good — if we had it in our power to do it." But she was already "so heavily Laded" that she was having to sell her property just to obtain "common support," Hannah explained, and so she could not afford to contribute. Catharine Littlefield (Mrs. Nathanael) Greene, replying to Esther Reed's circular letter, told a similar story. "The distressed exhausted State of this little Government [Rhode Island] prevents us from gratifying our warmest Inclinations," she declared, because one-fifth of its territory, including Newport, was still in British hands. "The

Women of this State are Animated with the liveliest Sentiments of Liberty" and wish to offer relief to "our brave and patient Soldierly," she exclaimed, "but alas! the peculiar circumstances of this State renders this impracticable."⁵⁵

Although the women's association found active participants only in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland, and Virginia, still it collected substantial sums of money. Its organizers next had to decide how to disburse the funds in accordance with their original aim, which was to present the American soldiers with "some extraordinary and unexpected relief, . . . *the offering of the Ladies*." Since Martha Washington had returned to Virginia by the time the collection was completed, the association's leaders agreed to leave the disposition of the funds to her husband. There was only one problem: George Washington had plans for the money that differed sharply from theirs. "Altho' the terms of the association seem in some measure to preclude the purchase of any article, which the public is bound to find," General Washington told Joseph Reed in late June, "I would, nevertheless, recommend a provision of shirts in preference to any thing else."⁵⁶ Esther Reed's much revised, amended, and overwritten draft of her reply to the general, with all its tactful phrasing, suggests something of the consternation this proposal caused in the ranks of the canvassers who had worked so hard and so long to collect the money.

On July 31, Mrs. Reed listed the reasons for her hesitancy in complying with the general's request for shirts. She had not only found it difficult to locate linen, she reported, but she had also learned that Pennsylvania was planning to send two thousand shirts to its troops and that a large shipment of clothing had recently arrived from France. "These Circumstances together with an Idea which prevails that the Soldiers might not consider it in the Light," she began, then crossed out the words following "Soldiers," and continued, "Soldiers would not be so much gratified by bestowing an article to which they look upon themselves entitled from the public as in some other method which would convey more fully the Idea of a reward for past Services & an incitement to future Duty." There she ended the sentence, having been so involved in her intricate prose that she failed to realize she had composed a fragment without a verb. Undaunted, she forged breathlessly ahead. "Some who are of this Opinion propose

turning the whole of the Money into hard Dollars & giving each Soldier 2 at his own disposal." Having made her point, Mrs. Reed then attempted to soften the fact that she was daring to dispute the judgment of the commander in chief of the American army. "This method I hint only," she added, "but would not by any means wish to adopt that or any other without your full approbation." To further lessen her apostasy, she also assured Washington that if shirts were still needed after the "fresh supplies" had been distributed, a portion of the money could be applied to that use.⁵⁷

Washington's response was, as Mrs. Reed later told her husband, "a little formal as if he was hurt by our asking his Opinion a second time & our not following his Directions after desiring him to give them." In his letter the general suggested, "A taste of hard money may be productive of much discontent as we have none but depreciated paper for their pay." He also predicted that some soldiers' taste for drink would lead them "into irregularities and disorders" and that therefore the proposed two-dollar bounty "will be the means of bringing punishment" on them. No, he insisted; if the ladies wanted to employ their "benevolent donation" well, the money should be used for shirts — which they should make to save the cost of hiring seamstresses. Faced with Washington's adamant stance, Esther Reed retreated. "I shall now endeavour to get the Shirts made as soon as possible," she told Joseph, and he agreed with her decision. "The General is so decided that you have no Choice left so that the sooner you finish the Business the better," he wrote on August 26, reminding her, "[I]t will be necessary for you to render a publick Account of your Stewardship in this Business & tho you will receive no thanks if you do it well, you will bear much Blame should it be otherwise."⁵⁸

Unfortunately, however, Esther DeBerdt Reed had no chance to "finish the Business" she had so ably begun, for she died the following month as a result of a dysentery epidemic. The leadership of the association was assumed by Sarah Franklin Bache, with the assistance of Anne Willing Francis and three other women. They took control of the funds that had been in Mrs. Reed's possession, overseeing the purchase of linen and the shirtmaking process. By early December, when the Marquis de Chastellux visited Sarah Bache's home, more than two thousand shirts had been completed. He recorded that "on

each shirt was the name of the married or unmarried lady who made it." Late that same month, the women gave the shirts to the Deputy Quartermaster General in Philadelphia, and Mrs. Bache told General Washington, "We wish them to be worn with as much pleasure as they were made."⁵⁹

In February 1781 Washington offered profuse thanks to the members of the committee that had succeeded Esther Reed as leaders of the Ladies Association. The organization's contributions, he declared, entitled its participants "to an equal place with any who have preceded them in the walk of female patriotism. It embellishes the American character with a new trait; by proving that the love of country is blended with those softer domestic virtues, which have always been allowed to be more peculiarly *your own*."⁶⁰

Washington's gratitude was genuine, and the army certainly needed the shirts, but the fact remains that the members of the association, who had embarked on a very unfeminine enterprise, were ultimately deflected into a traditional domestic role. The general's encomium on their contributions made this explicit by its references to "female patriotism" and "those softer domestic virtues," which presumably included the ability to sew. Ironically and symbolically, the Philadelphia women of 1780, who had tried to chart an independent course for themselves and to establish an unprecedented nationwide female organization, ended up as what one amused historian has termed "General Washington's Sewing Circle."

The amusement has not been confined to subsequent generations, for male revolutionary leaders, too, regarded the women's efforts with droll condescension. Benjamin Rush and John Adams exchanged wry comments on the association, with Adams proclaiming, "The Ladies having undertaken to support American Independence, settles the point." Women, on the other hand, saw nothing to smile at in the affair. Kitty Livingston, whose mother was a participant in the New Jersey group, sent a copy of *The Sentiments of an American Woman* to her sister Sarah Jay, then in Spain. "I am prouder than ever of my charming countrywomen," Sarah told her husband in forwarding the broadside to him, and she later repeated that message to Kitty when she thanked her for the information. Abigail Adams had a similar reaction, one that stands in sharp contrast to her husband's. Mrs. Adams took the association as a sign that "virtue exists, and publick

spirit lives — lives in the Bosoms of the Fair Daughters of America, who blushing for the Languid Spirit, and halting Step, unite their Efforts to reward the patriotick, to stimulate the Brave, to alleviate the burden of War, and to shew that they are not dismayed by defeats or misfortunes." To her, the women's activities proved that "America will not wear chains while her daughters are virtuous." Not for Abigail were any references to "female patriotism" or "softer virtues." She saw female Americans as equal participants in the war effort.⁶¹

The anonymous Philadelphian expressed an identical point of view in her correspondence with her Annapolis friend. "Some persons have amused themselves with the importance which we have given it," she remarked, alluding to what must have been widespread male condescension. "I confess we have made it a serious business," she declared, but "with great reason; an object so interesting was certainly worthy an extraordinary attention." She and her fellow canvassers had, she wrote, "consecrated every moment we could spare from our domestic concerns, to the public good," enduring "with pleasure, the fatigues and inconveniences inseparable from such a task," because they could reflect proudly on the fact that "whilst our friends were exposed to the hardships and dangers of the fields of war for our protection, we were exerting at home our little labours to administer to their comfort and alleviate their toil."⁶²

The proud sense of involvement in public affairs evident in these comments and in women's observations on their private contributions to the war effort carried over into the postwar years, for the return of peace did not bring with it a retreat from politics on the part of American women. Quite the contrary; their interest in the affairs of state continued unabated.

IV

In 1782, Eliza Wilkinson took up the cudgel on behalf of her sex. "The men say we have no business with them [politics], it is not in our sphere!" she told a friend angrily. "I won't have it thought that because we are the weaker sex as to *bodily* strength, my dear, we are

capable of nothing more than minding the dairy, visiting the poultry-house, and all such domestic concerns. . . . They won't even allow us the liberty of thought, and that is all I want. . . . Surely we may have sense enough to give our opinions to commend or discommend such actions as we may approve or disapprove; without being reminded of our spinning and household affairs as the only matters we are capable of thinking or speaking of with justness and propriety."⁶³

The serious interest in politics that lay behind Mrs. Wilkinson's tirade was not hers alone. In the late 1780s and 1790s women whose appetite for public affairs had been whetted by the events of the Revolution kept themselves abreast of political happenings through newspapers, conversations, and correspondence. "I am turned a great Politician," Margaret Manigault typically told her husband, Gabriel, in 1792; "I read the papers, & talk learnedly about them all." Similar statements may be found in the diaries or correspondence of nearly every white woman in late eighteenth-century America. In the spring of 1789, for example, Susanna Dillwyn reported that "a general subject of conversation at present" among herself and her female friends was "the newly elected president of the united States" and his recent inaugural address. Five years later, Alice DeLancey Izard turned a journey from Philadelphia to South Carolina into an opportunity to take soundings on the current political situation for her husband, Ralph, then a senator, sending him detailed accounts of her conversations with innkeepers and ferryboat operators.⁶⁴ From the French traveler who in 1791 encountered two young Virginia women eagerly taking part in political debates, to the New England girl who at a 1788 dance proudly pronounced herself a "politician" to a youth wishing to discuss the new Constitution, to Debby Logan, who in 1799 found it notable that during a visit to Philadelphia she had "scarsly spoke a Political Sentence," the indications are unanimous: after the Revolution women no longer regarded politics as falling outside their sphere. As Abigail Adams put it in 1799, "If a woman does not hold the reigns [*sic*] of Government, I see no reason for her not judging how they are conducted."⁶⁵

Mrs. Adams was perhaps the foremost female expert at that task of judging government. John Adams's travels as a diplomat and his long career in public service, concluding with his presidency at the end of the century, necessarily brought his intelligent wife more

directly into contact with the political world than any of her female contemporaries. Abigail, as her daughter Nabby once remarked, loved her "dish of politics," and from the beginning of John's involvement with the revolutionary cause she took an avid interest in public affairs. Hundreds of letters to her husband (in the 1770s and early 1780s) and to her sisters (in the late 1780s and the 1790s) testify to her unique political acumen. In November 1775, for example, she recognized the need for a "Code of Laws" at a time when America had been governed for some months by a de facto combination of committees and congresses. "Can any government be free which is not adminstred by general stated Laws?" she asked her husband. "Tis true your Resolutions as a Body have heithertoo had the force of Laws. But will they continue to have?" she inquired, accurately identifying the shaky legal ground upon which the American government would continue to rest until the adoption of the Articles of Confederation. She demonstrated similar perception when she predicted to her uncle in 1786 that Great Britain would not make concessions to the United States until "every legal impediment to the recovery of British debts" had been removed from state statute books. For Abigail Adams, political commentary not only was as natural as breathing (which was what she said to a granddaughter in 1812), but it was also an endeavor for which she showed remarkable talent.⁶⁶

But Mrs. Adams believed that a woman should express her political opinions only in private, rather than by taking part in public debates. Others of her female contemporaries were less traditionally minded. Letitia Cunningham, a Philadelphia widow who had bought government bonds during the war, published in 1783 a closely reasoned, well-researched pamphlet, *The Case of the Whigs Who Loaned their Money on the Public Faith Fairly Stated*, arguing on behalf of herself and other investors — but especially widows — that they were entitled to full interest payments on the loans. Likewise, Anne Willing Bingham, a niece of Elizabeth Willing Powel, openly challenged Thomas Jefferson's belief that American women should be "too wise to wrinkle their foreheads with politics." To Jefferson, the ideal feminine role was "to soothe and calm the minds of their husbands returning ruffled from political debate," and he criticized French women for meddling publicly in political affairs. Mrs. Bingham saw the matter quite differently. "The Women of France interfere in the

politics of the Country, and often give a decided Turn to the Fate of Empires," she told Jefferson in 1787. As a result, "they have obtained that Rank of Consideration in society, which the Sex are intitled to, and which they in vain contend for in other countries." Female Americans, she concluded, "are therefore bound in Gratitude to admire and revere them, for asserting our Privileges," rather than finding reason to shun their example, as Jefferson had suggested.⁶⁷

Although many American men were willing to allow women private political influence of the sort advocated and exercised by Abigail Adams, only in one state did the postrevolutionary era bring a real, if temporary, recognition of women's potential public role. In 1790, New Jersey adopted an election law that explicitly referred to voters as "he or she," thereby instituting a formal experiment with woman suffrage more than a century prior to the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution.⁶⁸

The origins of the New Jersey law are obscure. The state constitution of 1776 neither specifically disfranchised women nor enfranchised them, defining voters vaguely as "all free inhabitants" meeting property and residence requirements. Although this broad wording could conceivably have been intended to encompass eligible widows and spinsters as well as free black males, the constitution's phraseology probably represented a simple oversight on the part of its framers, as the opponents of woman and black suffrage later claimed. The electoral clause aroused no special comment at the constitutional convention; if deliberate, such a novel extension of the suffrage would surely have elicited considerable debate. Even so, the state constitution's lack of specificity allowed the newly politicized property-holding women of New Jersey to seize the initiative, and they successfully claimed the right to vote in local elections during the 1780s. The 1790 statute, and similarly worded election laws passed later that same decade, thus simply acknowledged and legitimized extant practice. By 1800, woman suffrage was so well established in the state that the legislature rejected an amendment providing for female voting in congressional races on the grounds that it was unnecessary. As one legislator said, "Our Constitution gives this right to maids or widows black or white."⁶⁹

One well-documented election in which women played a prominent role was the heated contest in 1797 over the seat for the town of

Elizabeth in the legislature. Reportedly, seventy-five female Federalists appeared at the polls to vote against the Democratic-Republican candidate, John Conduct. Although Conduct won, Federalist newspapers celebrated the women's activism, declaring their party's intention to "not only preach the 'Rights of Woman' but boldly push it into practice." The *Newark Centinel of Freedom* published a poem proclaiming,

*Let Democrats with senseless prate,
maintain the softer Sex, Sir,
Should ne'er with politics of State
their gentle minds perplex Sir:
Such vulgar prejudice we scorn;
their sex is no objection. . . .
While woman's bound, man can't be free,
nor have a fair election.*⁷⁰

Yet not all male New Jerseyites greeted woman suffrage with such exuberant glee. In his 1798 commentary on the state constitution William Griffith remarked that he found it a "mockery," even "perfectly disgusting," to watch female voters casting their ballots. "It is evident, that women, generally, are neither, by nature, nor habit, nor education, nor by their necessary condition in society, fitted to perform this duty with credit to themselves, or advantage to the public," he asserted. Griffith's words were echoed four years later by "Friend to the Ladies," who described women as "timid and pliant, unskilled in politics, unacquainted with all the real merits of the several candidates," and subject to the direction of their male relatives. "How will an obedient daughter dare to vote against the sentiments of her father and how can a fair one refuse her lover?" he asked. Assuring his female readers that he did not wish to deprive them of their rights, he suggested, "Let them rather consider that female reserve and delicacy are incompatible with the duties of a free elector, [and] that a female politician is often [the] subject of ridicule."⁷¹

In 1807, relying on the persistence of such traditional attitudes among his colleagues in the legislature, John Conduct had his revenge for his near-defeat at the hands of female voters ten years earlier: he

introduced the bill that successfully disfranchised both women and blacks. A fraudulent referendum supplied the immediate impetus for the law. The citizens of Newark and Elizabeth, vying over the location of the new Essex County Court House, evidently voted early and often. Whereas previous county elections had drawn a maximum of 4,500 votes, more than 14,000 ballots were cast in the 1807 referendum. In the wake of the contest, female and black voters became the scapegoats because they were believed to be easily manipulable. Even though white men undoubtedly composed most of the offenders, just as they made up the vast majority of voters, the legislature responded to the obvious corruption by disfranchising blacks and women, in order to restore "the safety, quiet, good order and dignity of the state."⁷²

New Jersey men had never displayed a strong commitment to the principle of woman suffrage; they had merely left a loophole in their constitution that allowed the boldest among their female fellow citizens to express directly a new sense of public responsibility. That the experiment was formalized at all was a tribute to the wartime politicization of the state's female population, and, indeed, illustrated the possible long-term consequences of that politicization. But even though the women of the revolutionary generation enthusiastically exercised their newfound public role, there are indications that many of their daughters and granddaughters reverted to a more traditional understanding of woman's place.

Take, for example, some suggestive evidence from nineteenth-century memoirs. Eliza Perkins Cabot, who was born in Boston in 1791, recalled as a novelty that in her youth women had been interested in politics. Her description of how her mother, aunts, and mother-in-law had "discuss[ed] political questions a great deal" makes it clear that to her such conversations were alien. A descendant's detailed memories of the political pursuits of Mary Anna Boardman, who had been born in 1767, convey a similar impression. "She felt, throughout life, those pulsations which, when she was a little child, she had felt, while rocked in the cradle of the Revolution," he wrote, finding it necessary to explain why she had been "careful to obtain accurate information" on "the various leading topics of the times" and to "intelligently mark the progress of our political affairs" as late as the 1840s.⁷³

Appropriately, then, in 1801 a new reference to sex in relationship to politics appeared in a letter written by a girl too young to remember the Revolution. Cautioned by her congressman father "not to converse much on political subjects," the fifteen-year-old North Carolinian Ann Steele drafted a reassuring reply. "I make it an invariable rule to be silent on political subjects. In my opinion they are altogether out of a ladys sphere." In spite of superficial appearances, all had not come full circle, for Ann admitted in the same letter, "I like to hear how the wheels of Government move," and, when she joined her father in Washington the following year, she regularly attended congressional debates.⁷⁴

Ann Steele, the patriotic daughter of a republican congressman, had accordingly become politically aware much earlier in life than her grandmother Elizabeth — the very woman who in 1780 had termed herself a "great politician" — or her mother, Polly. She grew up in a world very different from the colonial one that had shaped them, and her sensibilities likewise diverged from theirs. She may not have believed with them that a "lady" could regularly comment on politics, but she believed in keeping herself well informed about public affairs. Such matters were a part of her youth, whereas they had not been an element of the early lives of her mother and grandmother, whose youthful experiences had been entirely confined to the domestic realm. That fact alone meant that for her and the other members of the postwar female generation political discussion and even activism was never to be as alien as it had been to women born before 1760. Nineteenth-century women took pride in the contributions that members of their sex had made to the winning of independence. The existence of such public-spirited models showed them that women could take active roles in politics without losing their feminine identity. It was not by chance, in other words, that in 1848 the organizers of the first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls, New York, chose to use the Declaration of Independence as the basis for their calls for reform in women's status. They understood the relevance of the revolutionary era to their own endeavors.⁷⁵

Chapter Seven



NECESSITY TAUGHT US

MOST NARRATIVES OF THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR CONCENTRATE UPON describing a series of pitched battles between uniformed armies. Yet the impact of the conflict can more accurately be assessed if it is interpreted as a civil war with profound consequences for the entire population.¹ Every movement of troops through the American countryside brought a corresponding flight of refugees, an invasion of epidemic disease, the expropriation of foodstuffs, firewood, and livestock, widespread plundering or destruction of personal property, and occasional incidents of rape. In addition to bearing these common burdens of warfare, Americans who remained loyal to the Crown had to contend with persecution, property confiscation, and forced exile, as did patriots who lived in areas controlled by the British, although for them such reverses were only temporary.

The disruption of normal patterns of life that resulted from all these seldom-studied aspects of the conflict had an especially noticeable effect upon women, whose prewar experiences had been confined largely to the domestic realm. With their menfolk away serving in the armies for varying lengths of time, white female Americans had to venture into new fields of endeavor. In the midst of wartime trials, they alone had to make crucial decisions involving not only household and family but also the "outdoor affairs" from which they had formerly been excluded. After initially expressing hesitation about their