

---

---

John Lowell Rydjord Award

---

---

**The Philadelphia Ladies' Association  
and Women's Collective Political Participation  
in the American Revolution**

Susan deWees

Women of the late colonial period in America regularly engaged in what might be termed "prepolitical" activities, and the Revolutionary War presented occasions for extending those. The relatively autonomous status of women within religious groups such as the Quakers and some Baptist sects, and the use of petition as a means of legal redress had previously marked the boundaries of the political world for women. As the war neared, women employed other, more public modes of expression imbued with political meaning and implications, expression by which they demonstrated subscription to the ideology of the Revolution, even while denied access to its political privileges.<sup>1</sup>

The subtlety of the process perhaps predisposes to its being overlooked by the observer accustomed to equating political participation with suffrage. The Philadelphia Ladies' Association is one example of this phenomenon: although it bestowed female benevolence on Continental soldiers, its rhetoric clearly reveals political intentions. By politicizing activities traditionally relegated to the domestic sphere, this group offered female patriots an opportunity to circulate in a modestly larger political arena. Expanded participation of women, combined with changes in intellectual thought, revised the ideology pertaining to women's roles during the early Republic.

<sup>1</sup>Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *American Historical Review* 89 (June, 1984), 624; George C. Chalou, "Women in the American Revolution: Vignettes or Profiles?," in *Clio Was a Woman: Studies in the History of American Women*, ed. Mabel Deutch and Virginia C. Purdy (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1980), 227.

The ultimate effects of such participation on gendered history are, however, debatable.

Although women's politicized demonstrations, such as boycotts of British imports and public displays of textile production intended to supplant British cloth, antedated those of the Philadelphia Ladies' Association by several years, the Association was the first patriotic group organized and managed exclusively by women. Congregational ministers had sponsored spinning bees by "daughters of Liberty" in 1769 and, by widely publishing them, had promoted a form of political resistance based on sacrifice, self-discipline, and personal piety. The fifty-one women who signed the Nonimportation Association Resolves which circulated in seaport towns in 1774 did so within a framework such as that advocated by political pamphleteer Christopher Gadsden, as wives strengthening resistance via their household economies. While the potential impact of such moves on the eve of the Revolution was substantial--annual imports of British cloth alone amounted to £800,000--and while those acts politicized the household economy and initiated a political language that explicitly included women, women's inclusion was nevertheless shaped by relationships to males.<sup>2</sup> The attention given the boycotts, plus the fact that the American Revolution was a civil war, in which citizens were called upon to manifest their allegiances, virtually ensured that women would step from their traditional domain into the public world and into making political decisions. The Philadelphia Ladies' Association made that step.

Prominent women organized the group in 1780 as a response to adverse military and social developments. The Continental Army was ill-provisioned and demoralized as a result of defeats and of the economic disaster imposed by the conflict; civilians suffered equally from shortages and inflation. Worse, as noted by Mercy Otis Warren, who drew on her family's political connections and her own keen observations to write one of the first histories of the war, a general "declension of morals was equally rapid with the depreciation of [the] currency." Philadelphia women had consorted scandalously with the British during the occupation of the city eighteen months previously. The final impetus for action came with the fall of Charleston, South Carolina, on May 12. It was not by chance that the

<sup>2</sup>Christopher Gadsden, *The Writings of Christopher Gadsden*, ed. Robert Walsh (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1966), 83; James A. Henretta, "The War for Independence and American Economic Development," in *The Economy of Early America: The Revolutionary Period, 1763-1790*, ed. Ronald Hoffman, et al (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 58.

Association arose in Philadelphia, a city with a long tradition of both privatism and political activism: the Continental Congress sat there; during the war, the populace split not along lines of class or occupation, but of politics.<sup>3</sup> The leaders of the Association belonged to Pennsylvania's foremost political families: Esther deBerdt Reed, wife of the president of Pennsylvania; Sarah Franklin Bache; Mary Morris; Sarah Armitage Keane; Julia Stockton Rush. They were acutely aware that the war effort was faltering, among not just the army but the citizenry as well.

The women carefully crafted a strategy to demonstrate their support of the Continental Army, publishing it as "The Sentiments of an American Woman" in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on June 21, 1780. An appendix detailed their systematic plan of action. The appeal, likely written by Reed, exhorted all women to contribute funds for the army, to compensate for past indiscretions or inaction, and to show their patriotism. As outlined in the published plans, the members, who eventually numbered 1600, split the city into districts and, in pairs, canvassed door-to-door for cash contributions. They collected \$300,000 in depreciated currency, the equivalent of about \$7500 in scarce specie. Reed's son later proudly noted that in the same year, Philadelphia merchants opened a bank with a sum only slightly larger. On July 4, Reed notified General George Washington of their work, conveying the desire to give each Continental soldier \$2 in specie as an expression of the Association's sentiments and support. Washington demurred, citing problems a gift of specie might cause his men, who were paid in nearly valueless scrip and prone to drinking away their pay, and suggested that the women deposit their money in the national bank, where the army could withdraw it as needed. Politely insistent on giving a tangible offering uniquely their own and determined to contribute something beyond what the men had a right to expect from their states or Congress, the Association acceded to Washington's alternate suggestion and settled on linen shirts.<sup>4</sup> These they sewed themselves, tagging each with the name of its maker. When Reed died of dysentery in September, Bache took charge and delivered 2200 shirts to the Continental Army in December of 1780.

<sup>3</sup>Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* (1805; reprint, New York: AMS, 1970), 238; Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of its Growth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 23.

<sup>4</sup>William B. Reed, *The Life of Esther deBerdt, Afterwards Esther Reed* (1853; reprint, Philadelphia: Microsurance, 1968), 317.

The nature of this gift, on first consideration, might imply that the women's aims were benevolent. Reed's broadside, for instance, referred twice to "relief" for the soldiery, and her letter of July 4, 1780, to Washington referred to the Association's "esteem and gratitude." Elizabeth Ellet, the mid-nineteenth century biographer of women of the Revolutionary War, documented their activism as "charity in its genuine form, by which the Association, "seeing the necessity that asked interposition, relieved it." Philadelphia's Quaker women, furthermore, had a tradition of benevolence extending back several decades, and on the heels of the war female charitable societies supporting a variety of causes sprang into existence.<sup>5</sup> In this context, then, the Association might be construed as a benevolent organization.

Examination of the women's rhetoric, both individual and collective, private and public, suggests otherwise, that their primary goal was political. Writing to her brother in September of 1779, Reed reported that "every part of our life is so entwined with politics." In "The Sentiments of an American Woman," she invoked examples of Biblical and classical heroines, as well as that of Joan of Arc, who helped deliver France from the British, those whose "odious yoke we have just shaken off; and whom it is necessary that we drive from this continent." Anticipating the need to deflect criticism of the women's unprecedented actions, Reed asserted that a good citizen would "applaud our efforts." In a similarly bold stroke, she associated her compatriots, "born for liberty, disdaining to bear the irons of a tyrannic government," with female rulers who had "extended the empire of liberty." One anonymous canvasser valued the symbolic significance of her own efforts--she believed the subscription would "produce the happy effect of destroying intestine discords, even to the very last seeds." Such

<sup>5</sup>Esther Reed's letter to Washington found in Reed, *Life of Esther deBerdt*, 318; Elizabeth F. Ellet, *The Women of the American Revolution* (1850; reprint, New York: Haskell, 1969), 53. See Sydney V. James, *A People Among Peoples: Quaker Benevolence in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963) for a history of that sect's charity. Lori D. Ginzberg's *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990) is a landmark theoretical work on the evolution of women's benevolent societies from the 1790s through the end of the following century.

expressions came from traditions of both Protestant and classical republican rhetoric familiar to many of the women to whom she appealed.<sup>6</sup>

Some observers approved of the women's ideology and behavior; others did not. The broadside was widely reprinted. The relatively liberal physician Benjamin Rush, whose wife belonged to the Association, ebulliently proclaimed that "the Women of America have at last become principals in the Glorious American controversy." Women in Maryland, New Jersey, Virginia, and Rhode Island emulated the endeavor at the urging of the Philadelphia organization, although, due to different economic and military circumstances, they achieved less munificent results. The laudatory editor of the *Pennsylvania Packet* predicted that "the women will reinspire the war; and ensure, finally, victory and peace," and announced 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."<sup>7</sup> This praise in particular demonstrates how the intentions and implications of the group's activities were then interpreted: in classical and early modern republican terminology, political 'virtue' referred not to morality but to (implicitly male) civic spirit or action. Mercy Otis Warren, however, omitted mention of the Association in her three-volume history of the war, and Anna Rawle, a Quaker with a loyalist stepfather, criticized its actions as "importunate." Washington deflected the women's acts into the domestic sphere by granting them "an equal place with any, who have preceded them in the walk of female patriotism. It embellishes the American character with a new trait;

<sup>6</sup>Letter from Reed to her brother found in Reed, *Esther deBerdt*, 297; "The Sentiments of an American Woman," *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 21, 1780 (reprint, Philadelphia: Microsurance, 1968), 307; anonymous woman quoted in Mary Beth Norton, "The Philadelphia Ladies' Association," *American Heritage* 31 (April/May, 1980), 104. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich is one of the few historians to address the impact of religious belief on eighteenth-century women's public discourse; see "Daughters of Liberty: Religious Women in Revolutionary New England," in *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter Albert (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989).

<sup>7</sup>Benjamin Rush, *Letters of Benjamin Rush, Volume 1, 1761-1792*, ed. L. H. Butterfield (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1951), 253; editor of the *Pennsylvania Packet* quoted in Norton, "The Philadelphia Ladies' Association," 104-5. For discussion of semantics, particularly the use of the term 'virtue' and its transformation throughout the late colonial and early federal period, see Ruth H. Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," *Signs* 13 (autumn 1987) and Robert E. Shalhope, "Republicanism and Early American Historiography," *William and Mary-Quarterly* 39 (April, 1982).

by proving that the love of country is blended with those softer domestic virtues, which have always been allowed to be more peculiarly [their] own."<sup>8</sup> Contemporary interpretations thus differed widely.

Historical interpretations of the significance of women's Revolutionary roles differ substantially as well. Linda Kerber regards the Philadelphia Ladies' Association as the earliest extended American attempt to position women in the larger political community. Using active patriotism as a means of bringing politics into the domestic circle, the organization devised ways to make politics relevant to conditions of daily living. The women's benevolence and reform associations which grew out of the model of the Philadelphia Ladies' Association represent for Kerber a significant stage in women's political education: they provided a milieu for female collective behavior and enlarged women's political horizons, if only in a limited fashion. This theoretical position places women's abolitionist petitions as "lineal descendants" of Reed's broadside.<sup>9</sup> Mary Beth Norton discerns in the Revolutionary era the initiation in America of public dialogue on the subject of women and their proper role; their war efforts discredited the notion that women had no connection to the public sphere, and their "low level" political participation during the war helped to increase women's postwar autonomy. Joan Gundersen contends that women's roles were restructured by the Revolutionary generation, although not necessarily in a positive way, nor for all classes and races. Trends not directly attributable to the war (such as increased literacy, changes in attitudes toward love and marriage, and religious movements) altered expectations for and about women. Revolutionary rhetoric merely highlighted their dependence.<sup>10</sup> As memories of the war faded, so did images of women's public wartime competencies. Anne

<sup>8</sup>George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington*, vol VII, ed. Jared Sparks (Boston: Russell, Odiome, & Metcalf, 1835), 409; Anna Rawle quoted in Linda K. Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment--An American Perspective," *American Quarterly* 28 (summer 1976), 199.

<sup>9</sup>Linda K. Kerber, *Toward an Intellectual History of Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 91; idem, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 110.

<sup>10</sup>Mary Beth Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," *American Historical Review* 89 (June, 1984), 615-16; idem, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), passim; Joan R. Gundersen, *To Be Useful to the World: Women in Revolutionary America, 1740-1790* (New York: Twayne, 1996), 148-68.

Boylan and Nancy Cott ascribe little progressive effect to women's societies of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in that such groups reinforced a secondary status on the basis of domestic or religious roles. Boylan observes the holdover of earlier "deferential modes" of politics in benevolent societies.<sup>11</sup> James Henretta analyzes the significant contribution of women during and after the war as economic, in the form of expanded production from the farm and workshop and a broadened scope of work. Finally, Joan Hoff Wilson finds no benefits accruing to American women from the Revolution as, in her assessment, women were incapable of informed participation. She argues that the members of the Philadelphia Ladies' Association did not understand their overtly political activities and, further, that the different experiential level of women, plus the intellectually and psychologically limiting impact on women of the Great Awakening and the Enlightenment, made it impossible for even the best educated females to understand the political intent or principles behind the rhetoric of the Revolutionary Era.<sup>12</sup> Historical interpretation of this issue clearly runs a very broad gamut, with attainment of no theoretic consensus.

Regardless of the disparate theoretical interpretations of the impact of women's wartime politicization, it is clear that the Revolution engendered a change in roles. The focus on the rights and responsibilities of (male) citizens highlighted female dependence. Conceptions about gender difference in social roles underlay some of the most basic premises of the Revolution; modified by earlier intellectual developments and by the experiences of the war, including the Philadelphia Ladies' Association's model of political action by sacrifice, those conceptions shaped ideological changes in the early Republic. Essential transformations occurred: the association of women with nature and men with culture was reversed; feminine morality was given a political significance it previously lacked; and women were assigned the production and maintenance of domestic morality

<sup>11</sup>Anne M. Boylan, "Women in Groups: An Analysis of Women's Benevolent Organizations in New York and Boston, 1797-1840," *Journal of American History* 71 (December, 1984), 498-502; Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), passim; Anne M. Boylan, "Women and Politics in the Era before Seneca Falls," *Journal of the Early Republic* 10 (fall 1990), 363-82.

<sup>12</sup>Henretta, "American Economic Development," 72-73; Joan Hoff Wilson, "The Illusion of Change: Women and the American Revolution," in *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred P. Young (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), 387, 419-21.

and civic virtue.<sup>13</sup> The resulting synthesis of domestic and private with political and public roles became the ideological basis of women's participation in the polity for decades--in some instances, into the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup>

The Revolutionary conflict marked a turning point of sorts for women generally. It offered the chance to expand extremely limited opportunities for political participation, if only for the duration of the war, when traditional patterns of life were disrupted. Concepts of legal equality or suffrage were untenable, and evidence does not suggest that such concepts circulated among American women. Revolutionary rhetoric, in fact, spotlighted and reinforced their dependent status. The war did prompt some women, however, to seek an independent voice and relationship to the polity, and the Philadelphia Ladies' Association is an example of this. Located in perhaps the most highly politically charged city in the nation, organized by women with acute awareness and knowledge of political process, the Association was the first instance of collective political activism exclusively by women. Employing rhetoric that came from Protestant and classical republican traditions, its members shaped for themselves a new, if temporary, public role. If that role was based on sacrifice, rather than on concepts of citizenship or rights, it nevertheless served the times. Contemporary observers divided opinion over the propriety and place of such activism. Historic interpretation, additionally, is split over the lasting consequences of the ideology espoused by the Association, consequences viewed variously from almost totally positive to openly detrimental to the status of women. It is clear, however, that the American Revolution helped force discourse on women's role. The exigencies of the war and its attendant rhetoric produced a new model which conflated traditional domesticity with private and public virtue. This model adapted to the needs of the young Republic but left women with virtually no new rights. It would be left to their granddaughters, and to those women's granddaughters in turn, to define and pursue the more nearly equal status at which the Revolution had hinted.

<sup>13</sup>Kerber, "Republican Mother," 201; Bloch, "Gendered Meanings of Virtue," 39, 46-58.

<sup>14</sup>Kerber, "The Limits of Politicization: American Women and the American Revolution," in *The American and European Revolutions, 1776-1848: Sociopolitical and Ideological Aspects*, ed. Jaroslaw Pelenski (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1980), 71.