

Republican Motherhood

With the rising tide of revolutionary fervor in the 1770s and 1780s, a new conception of the role of women in the new United States of America arose. Not only did women make colonial boycotts of British goods successful political and economic weapons in colonial resistance to Parliament’s activities, they also helped create an image of American patriotism. Over the course of the Revolutionary War and the establishment of the New Republic, they also helped forge a new role for women in the new nation: Republican Motherhood.

Many American leaders worried about the longevity of the American experiment: Would future generations continue to work to maintain hard-won liberties and hold to the ideals of the Revolution? Many believed that the future of a republic depended upon the virtues of its citizenry. Hence, women were called upon to mold the next generation’s values so that they would support a republic. American mothers would shape the characters and educations of their sons, the next generation to lead the young nation. The idea was that American women should be educated in the principles of liberty, independence, and democracy to the extent that they could pass on these ideals to their children, especially their sons. Women were already recognized by many clergymen as having the role of ensuring morality and faith in the home – this stemmed from the First Great Awakening. They could easily expand their influence by also molding the political character of their offspring.

Many historians identify Abigail Adams,



A few Patriot women disguised themselves as men and fought in the war, and thousands more traveled with the Continental army, providing the troops with food and support. This 1779 woodcut (which accompanied a poem by Molly Guttridge, a “Daughter of Liberty”) symbolized the contributions of the Patriot women of the war-torn seaport of Marblehead, Massachusetts.

wife of John Adams and mother of John Quincy Adams, as the epitome of Republican Motherhood. Abigail was the political confidante of her best friend and husband, and she devoted considerable energy to the task of educating her sons in their obligations to home and country. For instance, in 1780 she wrote to her son, John Quincy Adams:

“Justice, humanity, and benevolence are

the duties you owe to society in general. To your country the same duties are incumbent upon you, with the additional obligation of sacrificing ease, pleasure, wealth, and life itself for its defence [*sic*] and security. To your parents you owe love, reverence, and obedience to all just and equitable commands. To yourself – here, indeed, is a wide field to expatiate you. To become what you ought to be, and what a fond mother wishes to see you....”

While American women were not gaining equal standing politically or economically with men – they were denied the vote, property rights, and so on – the movement in support of Republican Motherhood did open doors for many young women to gain some level of education. For instance, Dr. *Abigail Adams* Benjamin Rush, a prominent leader in 18th century America, wrote: “The equal share that every citizen has in the liberty and the possible share he may have in the government of our country make it necessary that our ladies should be qualified to a certain degree, by a peculiar and suitable education, to concur in instructing their sons in the principles of liberty and government.” Rush opened one of the first young ladies academies in the new nation, and other academies followed.

American women did not embrace the ideals of Republican Motherhood without question. Many American women had had the experience of running family businesses and farms without their husbands, brothers or fathers during the Revolutionary War. Some women, like Deborah Sampson, even disguised themselves as men and served as soldiers in the Continental Army. These women’s successes as independent businesspeople, homemakers,

and soldiers gave many American women a new level of confidence in their abilities and hope about the roles they could play in the new nation. Unfortunately, few of their hopes were realized. Even Abigail Adams, in her famous letter to her husband to “remember the ladies” hoped for a more inclusive role for American women.



Abigail Adams

The significance of Republican Motherhood lies in its recognition of the critical role women played in the American experiment. It gave women a role in the political realm of the U.S., though it was a remote one. The idea was something of a concession to women’s calls for some level of equality and rights in the new nation. Access to education would prove to be the first step towards gaining an equal

voice in the country, though it would be the first of many steps taken over more than a century. Women would not gain the right to vote until 1920, and they would still face an upward struggle to gain opportunities equal to men for decades after.

By the nineteenth century, Republican Motherhood would fade into the True Womanhood movement, which concentrated women’s place in the domestic sphere, separate from men, where they molded their children’s morality and patriotism while maintaining the sanctity of the home.

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