The Illusion of Change: Women and the American Revolution

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Seemingly a symbol of female patriotism, this engraving of a woman with a musket appeared on a broadside, "A New Touch of the Times," issued in 1777 by "A Daughter of Liberty." She lamented the effects of the war on women in the seaport towns and actually ended with a prayer, "Then gracious God, now cause to cease/This bloody war and give us peace!" The picture was used on other broadsides years before the war. New York Historical Society.
As a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, in the mid-1960s, I decided not to specialize in the field of Jacksonian Democracy because it would involve too much research in economics and interest group influence on politics, and because of the difficulty of determining the difference between ideology and behavior. As an indirect result of the free speech and antiwar movements on the campus, I have ended up spending most of my time since then in the field of economic foreign policy, dealing, ironically, with the influence (or lack thereof) of business interest groups on twentieth-century American diplomacy, and determining whether or not business ideology is always consistent with business activity.

When I first began to teach women's studies classes in 1970, I did not intend to apply any of the organizational theories or the economic research techniques that I had developed as a historian of foreign policy to the field of women's history. But I have been doing just that. My research in women's history has led me into a variety of projects, such as writing several scripts for *Women and the Law*, a series of video tapes for a nationally distributed law school course; compiling West Coast material for the *Women's History Sources Survey Project*; and integrating women's and ethnic history into secondary school curricula for the State of California Youth Authority.

As a direct result of working on this essay, I have begun a major new project on the impact of the American Revolution on the legal status of women, funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. At this writing, I am completing a biography of Anne Henrietta Martin (1875–1951), a leading western suffragist, author, and social critic from Nevada. Clearly I have fallen into a pattern of writing about two seemingly very different aspects of American history—foreign policy and women—both of which may benefit from analysis along structural-functional, interdisciplinary lines.

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To discuss individual women and the American Revolution is to talk about unrequited patriotism. To discuss individual women in relation to any specific historical event like a revolution, a depression, or any other major development in foreign and domestic policy is equally gratuitous. By themselves women seldom fit into the power and prestige categories that characterize standard textbook accounts of this nation's development.¹ Their contributions to history and the important societal conditions affecting them and other subordinate, powerless groups in American history are largely evolutionary in nature. Consequently, they do not dovetail with such common periodizations as the Revolution, the Jacksonian period, Reconstruction, or the Progressive Era.

Therefore, no attempt simply to document the specific individual or group actions of American women between 1763 and 1783 will contribute significantly to assessing their historical importance. One must begin to hypothesize about their collective stage of socioeconomic development before, during, and after the events leading up to and immediately following the War for Independence. Hence, the time period under discussion will generally be the last half of the eighteenth century and first decade of the nineteenth century, with particular attention given to the years from the end of the French and Indian War in 1763 to 1800. It was a period of war, socioeconomic change, and political upheaval.

This essay may raise more questions than it answers, for I am going to suggest, on the basis of my reading of the secondary scholarship in the field and a foray into a variety of primary sources, several
untested conceptual ways of viewing groups of American women who coincidentally were members of the revolutionary generation in eighteenth-century America. To begin to place into perspective the many roles assumed by women in the male-dominated societal processes, structural-functional, interdisciplinary and comparative methodologies, as defined by Robert F. Berkhofer and others, is essential. Whenever possible, the actual status of groups of women should be described from their point of view and then compared with the status usually assigned to them as isolated objects judged exclusively by male standards. Once these female perceptions are uncovered, we can then assess whether or not they are feminist, depending upon the degree to which women in any time period internalize the values of the man-made world in which they find themselves.

I realize that no single conceptual framework or methodology is completely satisfactory to unravel the complexities of women’s history. The application of a functional, comparative analysis will allow historians to more easily question the validity of behavior prescribed for women on the basis of standard patriarchal and often sexist value judgments about their contributions to history. By keeping in mind the differences among various classes and races of women, as well as individual differences among women, we may also move away from traditional generalizations about women as a whole.

Although the societal values assigned to functions performed by individuals or groups vary according to the prevailing norms of their time, women are usually found in low status roles characterized by involuntary or forced duties. However necessary these activities are to the development of a country’s socioeconomic institutions, in performing such tasks as household work, women seldom determine the parameters of their actions or the monetary value attached to them. Consequently, I will argue that certain types of female functions, leading either to the well-known exploitation of working women or to the ornamental middle-class housewife of the nineteenth century, were abetted by the American Revolution, although not caused by it.

This occurred because the functional opportunities open to women between 1700 and 1800 were too limited to allow them to make the transition in attitudes necessary to insure high status performance in the newly emerging nation. In other words, before 1776 women did not participate enough in conflicts over land, religion, taxes, local politics, or commercial transactions. They simply had not come into contact with enough worldly diversity to be prepared for a changing, pluralistic, modern society. Women of the postrevolutionary generation had little choice but to fill those low status functions prescribed by the small minority of American males who were prepared for modernization by enough diverse activities and experiences.

As a result, the American Revolution produced no significant benefits for American women. This same generalization can be made for other powerless groups in the colonies—native Americans, blacks, probably most propertyless white males, and indentured servants. Although these people together with women made up the vast majority of colonial population, they could not take advantage of the overthrow of British rule to better their own positions, as did the white, property-tied males who controlled economics, politics, and culture. By no means did all members of these subordinate groups support the patriot cause, and those who did, even among whites, were not automatically accorded personal liberation when national liberation was won. This is a common phenomenon of revolution within subcultures which, because of sex, race, or other forms of discrimination or deprivation of the members, are not far enough along in the process toward modernization to express their dissatisfaction or frustration through effectively organized action.

Given the political and socioeconomic limitations of the American Revolution, this lack of positive societal change in the lives of women and other deprived colonials is to be expected. It is also not surprising that until recently most historians of the period have been content to concentrate their research efforts on the increased benefits of Lockean liberalism that accrued to a relatively small percent of all Americans and to ignore the increased sexism and racism exhibited by this privileged group both during and after the Revolution. They have also tended to ignore the various ways in which the experience of the Revolution either fastened or retarded certain long-term eighteenth-century trends already affecting women.

What has been called in England and Europe “the transformation of the female in bourgeois culture” also took place in America between 1700 and 1800. This process would have occurred with or without a declaration of independence from England. It produced a class of American bourgeois who clearly resembled the group of middle-class women evident in England a century earlier. However, the changing societal conditions leading up to this transformation in American women were much more complex than they had been for seventeenth-century British women because of the unique roles, that
is, functions, that colonial women had originally played in the settlement and development of the New World. The American Revolution was simply one event among many in this century-long process of change. It was a process that ultimately produced two distinct classes of women in the United States—those who worked to varying degrees exclusively in their homes and those who worked both inside and outside of their homes.

To understand this uniquely American process it is necessary to examine five major societal factors defining the status and function of American women throughout the eighteenth century. They were economic, demographic, religious, educational, and legal-political changes that the colonies were experiencing on the road to modernity. This entire process involved the gradual maturation of preindustrial capitalism, and initially it appeared that both men and women were subjected to the same set of transitional economic forces, sociopsychological pressures, and material improvements. Or at least this is the well-preserved illusion of most scholarship on the subject. Instead, it would seem that the first leg of this journey of women into the modern world contained some distinctly different experiences and fewer direct liberalizing benefits and high status functions than it did for men.

Moreover, these five societal conditions had an unequal impact on various classes and groups of colonial women. Their effect was experienced in different degrees, ranging from the middle and upper strata of free white society down to the free and unfree at the bottom of that society: indentured servants and domestics. Black female slaves, native American women, vagabonds, and free, white females living in the most isolated frontier areas sometimes constitute exceptions to the generalizations to be discussed about the changing status and function of eighteenth-century women. Only one aspect of colonial life remained the same for all women. This was the legacy of the "ideology of subordination" inherited from patriarchal Judaic-Christian, western European traditions that produced cultural and economic discrimination against women at all levels of society. At best this ideology was skewed or modified temporarily to meet the immediate needs of colonization, but it was never seriously challenged before 1776 except by isolated seventeenth-century religious radicals like the Puritan Anne Hutchinson or the Quaker Mary Dyer.

After examining these five long-range trends I will turn to the experiences influencing the political consciousness of women during the Revolution and finally to the limitations of the ideology of the most articulate advocates of women's rights—both of which further explain the failure of the Revolution to bring about significant change for women.

II

Before embarking on this lengthy exploration, there is a need to come to grips with two problems that plague almost all students of women's history, whatever the place and period, and especially those who deal with women in a time of revolution: first, the problem of interpreting the semantics of the era, and, second, the problem of defining feminism.

The American Revolution poses special problems of rhetoric which scholars of "ideology" have only recently been giving attention to. The English language was in a process of historical change in the colonies; moreover, individual political words and slogans came to mean different things to women, who were barred from most avenues of public life, than to men, who were not. Consequently we find that a patina of platitudes overlays almost all descriptions of the contributions of "female Patriots," especially during the war. They are described as "patriotic mothers [who] nursed the infancy of freedom," or as forces "for pure living and general righteousness" and as "conservator[s] of moral power." Such statements not only distort but also serve to obliterate the significant historical legacy of this generation of women. As a result, the collective contributions, particularly of lower-class women, to the war effort have been ignored because, like Margaret ("Dirty Kate") Corbin, they cannot be described as having preserved their "virtue and chastity. . . . unblest." In the case of Deborah Sampson Gannett and the legendary "Molly Pitcher," these poor, rugged women have been formed into feminine, genteel nineteenth-century "ladies."

During the 1780s and 1790s there was an increase in similarly flowery rhetoric to describe the importance of "the patriotic Females who their Country saved," of women "instructing their sons in the principles of liberty and government," who had the "reformation of the world" in their power, and the responsibility for keeping the nation independent through their virtuous conduct. It is not unusual for revolutionary generations to be overly concerned with moral standards and to view women as the natural repository of virtue. This had been a common assumption of western culture for many centuries—one that was simply reinforced by revolutionary conditions.

Yet historians of the period have traditionally ignored any system-
atic semantic analysis of this positive rhetoric, as well as the pervasive negative symbolic portrayal of England by the patriots as the personification of an evil, vindictive mother. Obviously these are contrasting elements in the rhetoric of the revolution. The degree to which one or the other prevailed in affecting the actual, as opposed to the idealized, status of women or the family during and after the war has yet to be investigated.

Even in the absence of adequate semantic analysis of the effect of rhetoric on behavior and values, I see little point in contemporary historians' continuing to infer, as did most male and female writers of the late eighteenth century, that through their function as educators within the home, "traditional womanly virtues were endowed with political purpose." Indeed, a careful reading of some of the most articulate women indicates that they were already dimly aware of the discrepancy between their actual function in society and the exaggerated rhetorical roles assigned to them.

Abigail Adams, for example, grasped the limitations of the educational function of virtuous, upper-class women and of the inadequacy of their education. Writing in the summer of 1782 to both her husband and her cousin John Thaxter, she first pointed out that "patriotism in the female Sex is the most disinterested of all virtues" because women had no political rights. Hence their patriotism consisted of the unheralded act of surviving the loss in battle of "those whom we Love most." Then she most astutely noted that given the increase in political corruption and private vice during the war, she did not see how women could effectively transfer their private virtues to the public realm. How could they possibly control the virtue of society, as Rousseau had recommended, when their distinctly inferior female education and socialization had instilled in them ideas of morality which males did not necessarily share? Indeed, what means did they have at their disposal for such an enormously pretentious task? It was obvious, at least to Abigail Adams, that education conducted in the home was not the way to preserve uncorrupted republicanism. Her friend Mercy Otis Warren elaborated on some of these thoughts in 1800 when she said that education was as unnecessary for a woman as virtue was for a gentleman. In 1805, in her three-volume History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution, she commented negatively on the decline in virtue of the "children of Columbia," nowhere indicating that women could stem this counterrevolutionary tide.

The women of the revolution, when not described collectively in platitudinous phrases as paragons of virtue and patriotism, which they supposedly transmitted through their household roles as educators, were usually damned with faint praise, even by those among who were in a position to know better. Thus, Mercy Warren in her history, as in her earlier patriotic plays and poetry, ignored entirely the significant contributions of women to the Revolution—an indication of the limitations of her "feminism." Instead, her most direct comment on the subject came during the war when she wrote: "Be it known unto Britain even American daughters are politicians and patriots, and will aid the good work with their feeble efforts."15

Worse still, perhaps, has been the opposite practice among historians to single out a few identifiable women for acts of military heroism when there is the distinct possibility that numerous camp followers were regularly involved in at least artillery combat. Thus most works on women in the Revolution contain the same descriptions of a handful of women who are assumed to be the only ones to fight or to act as spies and couriers during the war—"Molly Pitcher," Margaret Sybil Ludington, Mary Ludwig Hays McCauly, Nancy Morgan Hart, Lydia Barrington Darragh, Margaret Corbin, Sally St. Clair, and Deborah Gannett Sampson or those who represented extreme examples of personal courage, self-sacrifice, or symbolic action. One of the most celebrated, commonly cited examples of the latter is the story of Betsy Ross and the first flag, which turns out to be apocryphal.17

The second major problem in writing about women of this or any other period—defining feminism—may be put this way: Is feminism a historically restricted term, or is its definition necessarily timeless? Can a single unifying feminist factor be found among eighteenth-century women, regardless of class, that falls within the boundaries of such a definition? How broadly can feminist political activity be defined in an age when women had no formal political rights? For purposes of this essay I will begin with Gerda Lerner's general definition of feminism. Lerner has said it "embraces all aspects of the emancipation of American women." Feminism incorporates, therefore, "any struggle to elevate [women's] status, socially, politically, economically, and in respect to their self concepts," whereas the term women's rights movement refers more narrowly to obtaining legal and political rights.18

Even this definition, however, does not answer the crucial question of whether or not women who define themselves and their struggle for emancipation exclusively in terms of male rights and standards
are indeed feminists. In other words, all feminists support women’s rights movements, but not all members of women’s rights movements are feminists unless they consciously perceive of themselves as agents for societal change in other than patriarchal terms. In fact, however, most female activists have adhered traditionally to a very narrow definition of equality at best—one, I suggest, that is not feminist unless it encompasses attacks on such traditional patriarchal bailiwicks as the sanctity of motherhood, the family, the institution of marriage, or the prevailing male-dominated economic and political systems. Moreover, they are seldom concerned with preserving or creating a female culture or consciousness separate from one that simply internalizes male standards.

In *Woman as Force in History*, Mary Beard argued logically, if ineffectually, against this limited type of equality and consciousness based on “man the measure of excellence.” In taking this position in 1946, she criticized past and present women reformers whom she correctly described as having simplistically portrayed women over the ages as in a state of total subjection. Then she noted that they contradicted themselves by citing examples of exceptional historical women figures when they demanded immediate legal equality, that is, male status as the means for achieving emancipation. Beard also rejected their argument because she did not personally believe that complete equality between men and women would ever be legislated, and because she associated the position with communist and socialist theories of equality.19

While I do not agree with all of Beard’s reasons for opposing female demands for legal equality, I believe that she not only raised the essential question about their effectiveness, but she also pointed out the basic contradiction in the reasoning that led to them and which continues to exist in most historical studies of women. In fact, neither the total subjection theory nor the exceptional woman extolled for her male qualities provides adequate analytical models for research in the field of women’s history or for defining what constitutes feminist activity. The former is obviously contradicted by the existence of the exceptions; the latter continues to make the standards for determining what is important about women in American history the same as those for men. To avoid both the confusion and the contradiction arising from these traditional analytical models, I have already suggested a functional, comparative analysis of women’s collective roles in society. I have now offered a definition of feminism based on a conscious, an-patriarchal concept of female behavior and culture that I hope will reduce its indiscriminate application to all types of independent, outspoken women, regardless of the cause or issue they champion.

This definition will make clear why I will argue later that, unlike the English radical theorist Mary Wollstonecraft, the most articulate of late eighteenth-century American women cannot be considered feminists.

III

Since the 1920s an increasing number of historians have argued that during the colonial period women enjoyed a less sex-stereotyped existence than at any time until recently, despite the absence of any significant number of organized or individual feminists. This argument is largely an exaggeration based on inadequate samplings of the small group of women who worked outside the home, or the few who actually appeared in probate records, paid taxes, wrote wills, or asserted their legal and political rights through petitions and occasional voting.

It is true, however, for most of the period up to 1750 that conditions out of necessity increased the functional independence and importance of all women. By this I mean that much of the alleged freedom from sexism of colonial women was due to their initial numerical scarcity and the critical labor shortage in the New World throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Such increased reproductive roles (economic as well as biological) reflected the logic of necessity and not any fundamental change in the sexist, patriarchal attitudes that had been transplanted from Europe. Based on two types of scarcity (sex and labor), which were not to last, these enhanced functions of colonial women diminished as the commercial and agricultural economy became more specialized and the population grew.

A gradual “bourgeoisement” of colonial culture accompanied this preindustrial trend toward modern capitalism. It limited the number of high status roles for eighteenth-century American women just as it had for seventeenth-century English and European women. Alice Clark, Margaret George, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Jane Abray have all argued convincingly that as socioeconomic capitalist organization takes place, it closes many opportunities normally open to women both inside and outside of the family unit in precapitalist times. The decline in the status of women that accompanied the appearance of bourgeois
modernity in England, according to Margaret George, "was not merely a relative decline. Precapitalist woman was not simply relatively eclipsed by the great leap forward of the male achiever; she suffered rather, an absolute setback."20

In the New World this process took longer but was no less debilitating. Before 1800 it was both complicated and hindered by the existence of a severe labor shortage and religious as well as secular exhortations against the sins of idleness and vanity. Thus, colonial conditions demanded that all able-bodied men, women, and children work, and so the ornamental, middle-class woman existed more in theory than in practice.

The labor shortage that plagued colonial America placed a premium on women's work inside and outside the home, particularly during the war-related periods of economic dislocation between 1750 and 1815. And there is no doubt that home industry was basic to American development both before and after 1776. It is also true that there was no sharp delineation between the economic needs of the community and the work carried on within the preindustrial family until after the middle of the eighteenth century. Woman's role as a household manager was a basic and integral part of the early political economy of the colonies. Hence she occupied a position of unprecedented importance and equality within the socioeconomic unit of the family.21

As important as this function of women in the home was, from earliest colonial times, it nonetheless represented a division of labor based on sex-role stereotyping carried over from England. Men normally engaged in agricultural production; women engaged in domestic gardening and home manufacturing—only slave women worked in the fields. Even in those areas of Massachusetts and Pennsylvania that originally granted females allotments of land, the vestiges of this practice soon disappeared, and subsequent public divisions "simply denied the independent economic existence of women." While equality never extended outside the home in the colonial era, there was little likelihood that women felt useless or alienated because of the importance and demanding nature of their domestic responsibilities.22

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries spinning and weaving were the primary types of home production for women and children (of both sexes). This economic function was considered so important that legal and moral sanctions were developed to insure it. For example, labor laws were passed, compulsory spinning schools were established "for the education of children of the poor," and women were told that their virtue could be measured in yards of yarn.23 So from the beginning there was a sex, and to a lesser degree a class and educational, bias built into colonial production of cloth, since no formal apprenticeship was required for learning the trade of spinning and weaving.

It has also been recognized that prerevolutionary boycotts of English goods after 1763 and later during the war increased the importance of female production of textiles both in the home and in the early piecework factory system. By mid-1776 in Philadelphia, for example, 4,000 women and children reportedly were spinning under the "putting out system" for local textile plants.24

The importance of those few women who fulfilled other economic roles in addition to their household activities is not so readily demonstrable. The documentation about bona fide female entrepreneurs remains highly fragmentary and difficult, if not impossible, to analyze with statistical accuracy.25 Many, if not most, appear to be the widows of "men who had been less affluent." If we take Philadelphia as representative of greater urban specialization and utilization of female workers due to the shortage of labor,26 we find a significant number of women in only three entrepreneurial occupations up to 1776: shopkeeping, innkeeping, and crafts-making. The first two were obviously sex-role based in that most of the early retail stores and taverns were located in private homes and simply represented an extension of normal household duties. Although crafts-women also often sold their products directly from their individual dwellings, their work was not always related to traditional domestic tasks. Thus, Philadelphia women engaged in roughly thirty different trades ranging from essential to luxury services. They included female silversmiths, tinworkers, barbers, bakers, fish picklers, brewers, tanners, ropemakers, lumberjacks, gunsmiths, butchers, milliners, harnessmakers, potash manufacturers, upholsterers, printers, morticians, chandlers, coachmakers, embroiderers, dry cleaners and dyers, woodworkers, staymakers, tailors, flour processors, seamstresses, netmakers, braziers, and founders.27

It is this impressive array of female artisans in Philadelphia and other colonial towns that has led to the conclusion that work for women was much less sex-stereotyped in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than it was to become in the nineteenth. The validity of this claim has yet to be documented by a comparative analysis of female artisans in different areas. On the one hand, women found
themselves in these essential and nonfamilial roles because they were substituting for dead or absent husbands; on the other hand, it was not considered "inappropriate" according to prevailing socioeconomic norms for women to engage in this wide variety of occupations, carry on the family business if widowed, or become a skilled artisan while still married. Single and married women operating their own shops and taverns were an even more common fact of colonial life.28

From tavern licenses issued in Philadelphia, for example, it is clear that between 1762 and 1776 no less than 17 percent, and even as much as 22 percent, of all tavern operators were women,29 and these figures do not include those women who may have been operating illegally without licenses.30 Such fragmentary evidence shows there were at least ninety-four female shopkeepers operating in Philadelphia between 1720 and 1776, and that in 1717 nine out of twenty-eight, or 32 percent, of all shopkeepers taking out "freedoms" were women. None of these businesswomen seem to have been given any special attention or consideration—not even the six who signed the nonimportation agreement of 25 October 1765. At the moment there is no way of knowing how representative these figures on innkeepers or "she-merchants" are for other colonial towns on the eve of the American Revolution.31

The increasing commercial and agricultural specialization prior to 1776,32 affected all Americans, but particularly women, whether they were the vast rural majority who engaged in home production or the few who became entrepreneurs in the cities and towns. Probably the most significant changes were an erratic rise in the standard of living and a substantial increase in the number of landless proletarians in the major urban areas. There is now evidence that the uneven and unequal distribution of wealth as shown for Boston existed as well in Philadelphia, Newport, and New York City. Any amount of economic inequality was particularly devastating for widows, who often had dependents to support. The economic plight of the increasingly large number of widows also led to an expansion of their legal rights before 1776, so that they could convert real property into capital for personal support or investment purposes.33

American living standards fluctuated with the unequal prosperity that was especially related to wars. Those engaging in craft production and commerce were particularly hard hit after 1750, first by the deflation and depression following the French and Indian War (1754-1763), and then by the War for Independence. In fact, not only were the decades immediately preceding and following the American Revolution ones of economic dislocation, but the entire period between 1775 and 1815 has been characterized as one of "arrested social and economic development."34 These trends, combined with increased specialization, particularly with the appearance of a nascent factory system, "initiated a decline in the economic and social position of many sections of the artisan class." Thus with the exception of the innkeeping and tavern business, all of the other primary economic occupations of city women were negatively affected by the periodic fluctuations in the commercial economy between 1763 and 1812.34

Women artisans and shopkeepers probably suffered most during times of economic crisis because of their greater difficulty in obtaining credit from merchants. Although research into their plight has been neglected, the documents are there—in the records of merchant houses showing women entrepreneurs paying their debts for goods and craft materials by transferring their own records of indebtedness, and in court records showing an increased number of single women, especially widows sued for their debts, or in public records of the increased number of bankrupt women who ended up on poor relief lists or in debtors' prisons or who were forced to become indentured servants or earn an independent living during hard times.35

It was also a difficult time for household spinners and weavers, about whom a few more facts are known. First, this all-important economic function increasingly reflected class distinctions. In 1763 one British governor estimated that only the poor wore homespun clothes, while more affluent Americans bought English imports. Second, it was primarily poor women of the northern and middle colonies who engaged in spinning and weaving for pay (often in the form of credit rather than cash), while black slave women and white female indentured servants performed the same function in the South. Naturally women in all frontier areas had no recourse but to make their own clothing. Beginning with the first boycotts of British goods in the 1760s, women of all classes were urged to make and wear homespun. Several additional "manufacturers" were established as early as 1764 in major cities specifically for the employment of poor women. Direct appeals to patriotism and virtue were used very successfully to get wealthier women to engage in arduous home-spinning drives, but probably only for short periods of time.36

Thus all classes of women were actively recruited into domestic textile production by male patriots with such pleas as, "In this time of
public distress you have each of you an opportunity not only to help
to sustain your families, but likewise to call your mite into the treasury
of the public good." They were further urged to "cease trifling their
time away [and] prudently employ it in learning the use of the spinning
wheel."37 Beyond any doubt the most well-known appeal was the
widely reprinted 9 November 1767 statement of advice to the "Daugh-
ters of Liberty" which first appeared in the Massachusetts Gazette. It read
in part:

First then throw aside your high top knots of pride
Wear none but your own country linen.
Of economy boast. Let your pride be the most
To show cloaths of your make and spinning.

Peak periods in prerevolutionary spinning and weaving were
reached during every major boycott from 1765 to 1777. But the war
and inflation proved disruptive. For example, we know that the United
Company of Philadelphia for Promoting American Manufactures,
which employed 500 of the City's 4,000 women and children spinning
at home, expired between 1777 and 1787, when it was revived. The
record of similar organizations elsewhere was equally erratic.38

It is common for developing countries with a labor shortage to
utilize technological means to meet production demands. After the
war, the new republic proved no exception, as the inefficiency and
insufficiency of household spinners became apparent. Ultimately the
"putting out" system was replaced entirely by the factory that em-
ployed the same women and children who had formerly been
household spinners. It took the entire first half of the nineteenth
century before this process was completed, and when it was, it turned
out to be at the expense of the social and economic status of female
workers.39

At the beginning of this process, however, the early cotton mills
in the last quarter of the eighteenth century utilized skilled immigrants
of both sexes. In fact, according to one recent study, the years between
1763 and 1812 constituted the "non-verbal period of industrial tech-
nology" in American history. During this time English technological
"know-how" was transferred to the United States primarily through
artificers who either owned, could build, or could operate the latest
"labour-saving machines." In July 1788, for example, the Pennsylvania
Society located a woman who owned a twisting mill and immediately
employed her "on the best Terms." How many of these migrating
artisans were women is not yet precisely known.40

Direct employment in these early cotton textile mills was the final
way, therefore, in which changing economic conditions affected
women. Such employment did not represent a new economic function
for women—it simply shifted their place of work from the home to the
factory. Economic nationalists like Secretary of the Treasury Alex-
der Hamilton recognized the contributions of women in the produc-
tion of cloth under the traditional "domestic system." At the same time
he recommended, in his well-known Report on Manufactures of 1791,
that women and children be utilized in the factory production of cotton
goods. All economic nationalists, both Federalist and Republican,
openly recognized that the labor of women and children would have
to be exploited if the nation were to industrialize.41

The position was reinforced in the 1790s by male moralists who
preached that poor women who did not take up factory work would be
"doomed to idleness and its inseparable attendants, vice and guilt."42
Through at least the War of 1812, this unholy alliance temporarily
prolonged the pragmatic colonial idea that "woman's place was... not
in the home,... but wherever her 'more important' work was." Now,
however, this idea became the basis for making a class distinction
between women that had not been possible throughout most of the
preindustrial colonial period. In other words, the potential economic
contribution of women to the new textile industry contrasted sharply
with the propagandistic rhetoric of the 1780s and the 1790s, which
portrayed them as preservers of republican virtue, exclusively within
the home as patriotic wives and educators.

Each role could be (and was) justified in the name of nationalism.
But each projected distinctly different future tasks for women, depend-
ing upon their socioeconomic status. One led to the dual capitalist
exploitation of women as a reserve supply of cheap labor in industry
and the home, without any increase in their economic power or per-
sonal status; the other led to a less functional and isolated position of
women within the modern, middle-class nuclear family, whose domes-
tic duties and responsibilities gradually declined until they consisted
primarily of improving male manners and nurturing children. Both
were necessary for rapid industrialization in the nineteenth century.

While the industrialization that the War of 1812 stimulated did
more to hasten these class distinctions (as well as the low status and
alienating features of women’s work inside and outside of the home) than did the American Revolution, the latter set the stage for what was to follow both in the attitudes toward women it fostered and the requirements it set for economic growth.

IV

Before, during, and after the Revolution, American women were experiencing important demographic changes that ultimately contributed to their socioeconomic subordination in the modern world. These demographic factors were of such an evolutionary nature, however, that few seem to have been directly affected by the Revolution itself, save for the temporary disruption of the nuclearity of family life, as men left home to participate in political or military activities, and for the lowering of sexual and moral standards that normally accompanied wars.

To date most social demographers have concentrated on the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries rather than the revolutionary period. Nonetheless, much can be inferred from recent studies of family reconstitution about the condition of women on the eve of the American Revolution. While regional differences remain to be studied, significant strides have been taken with vital statistics from about a half dozen small New England communities, which suggest trends for the colonial household in that area. Since such figures could not be obtained from traditional literary sources, earlier assumptions about mortality rates, domestic stability, family size, child raising, education, male-female sex roles, and even remarriage rates are now being questioned.

In general, living conditions in New England (but not in the South) appear to have been more stable and healthy, especially in the seventeenth century, than they were in England and Europe. Thus, there is evidence of increased longevity for adults, decreased deaths from childbirth, and lower mortality rates for infants and adolescents. And contrary to what was commonly thought, the duration of first marriages was quite high—ranging from between twenty and twenty-five years in some New England towns—while remarriage of widows was less likely than once assumed.

Even the much heralded and first significant demographic fact about colonial women, namely their scarcity, has been cast into a new light by social demographers. It is true, for example, that men outnumbered women by three to one in the initial immigration to New England, and by six to one in the early Virginia settlements. Nevertheless, this extreme imbalance in the sex ratio soon succumbed to the high fertility level among colonial women and to lower mortality rates in the New England colonies at the beginning of the eighteenth century. In the middle and southern colonies fertility was also high, but so were mortality rates. Consequently, in these areas immigration continued to play an important role not only in maintaining population growth but also in contributing to a sex imbalance. In colonies like Virginia and Maryland, for example, there were still about three men for every two women in 1700. Even though women colonists in the South showed a greater resistance than men to disease during the “seasoning” process, they remained scarce for the next twenty or thirty years. In contrast, by 1700 the larger New England coastal towns and small eastern settlements actually experienced a surplus of unmarried women, which continued to increase and whose significance has yet to be evaluated by historians.

By 1750, at least northern colonial America could no longer be considered a “paradise on earth for women,” where every free, white female could marry and where a stable, parental dominated marriage system or family of orientation (birth) prevailed. It was in the throes of a “demographic crisis.” Among other things, this meant that the age gap narrowed between men and women at the time of their first marriages, with men generally marrying slightly earlier and women slightly later. In addition to facing the possibility of not being able to marry, or remarry, in the case of widows, by the time of the Revolution women had been gradually adjusting to changing courtship and marriage patterns, loosened sexual mores, smaller family size, and (among the wealthier, better educated) to more permissive theories from foreign authors about child raising, romantic love, and sex-stereotyped definitions of femininity. All of these demographic alterations were part of the process of family modernization—that is, the evolution from the family of orientation to the family of procreation. This transition was most pronounced in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and is therefore coincidentally connected but not substantially affected by the Revolution.

It was the changing position of women within this gradually evolving conjugal household and its declining socioeconomic importance in general that posed the most serious demographic problems for the