

# Women of the American Revolution

A Unit of Study for Grades 5–8

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Introduction

Approach and Rationale . . . . .	1
Content and Organization . . . . .	1

## Teacher Background Materials

I. Unit Overview . . . . .	3
II. Unit Context . . . . .	3
III. Correlation with the National History Standards . . . . .	4
IV. Unit Objectives . . . . .	4
V. Introduction to <i>Women of the American Revolution</i> . . . . .	5
VI. Lesson Plans . . . . .	6

<b>Dramatic Moment . . . . .</b>	<b>7</b>
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## Lessons

Lesson One: Daughters of Liberty . . . . .	9
Lesson Two: Women in the Revolution. . . . .	17
Lesson Three: Remember the Ladies . . . . .	28
Lesson Four: Republican Mothers . . . . .	37

<b>Annotated Bibliography . . . . .</b>	<b>47</b>
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## TEACHER BACKGROUND

### I. UNIT OVERVIEW

Relying on primary sources, this unit introduces students to the American Revolution. The lessons divide the conflict into three periods: the friction leading to the war, the struggle for independence, and the expectations that shaped people's participation. The feature which distinguishes this treatment of the Revolution from other lessons is a focus on the conflict from the perspective of women.

The importance of women in the development of American society is only now beginning to be fully recognized. Although women have always comprised more than half of the population, their presence in recorded history has been marginal. Until recent decades, most historians focused their interest on political, military, or commercial leaders. With few exceptions, women had traditionally been excluded from these careers of public power. However, the study of history has changed dramatically in the last generation. Historians have come to recognize the important roles that ordinary people, male and female, have had in shaping our nation. A more inclusive picture of the past which considers the contributions of people previously neglected in historical writing not only more accurately describes the past, but will help students appreciate that they too have a role in history's pageant. Moreover, an accurate account of the past can partially explain some of the enduring social inequalities which are the consequence of culture, not biology. Seeing the gradual transformation of social values and practices can give students both a sense of their capacity to influence their community and an appreciation of how their community, in turn, shapes them.

The focus on women, while intended in part as a corrective for the general neglect of women in history, is more than a gesture. During the Revolutionary Era women comprised half of colonial society. Their contributions were crucial to the final victory. Although most women were noncombatants, they were subjected to the consequences of war, including suffering, violence, and death.

### II. UNIT CONTEXT

This unit should be taught after studying the late colonial period and prior to examining the Constitution and early republic. While this unit is designed to be an adequate introduction to the Revolution, some teachers will want to treat the nation's founding in greater depth. This unit could therefore complement more traditional treatments of the Revolution. The first lesson can be used to introduce a more extended examination of the causes of the Revolution. The second lesson can be taught in conjunction with lessons on the campaigns and battles. The last two lessons can be used to discuss the legacy of the Revolution. Students can consider how far the Revolution succeeded in achieving its goals.

### **III. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL HISTORY STANDARDS**

**W**omen of the American Revolution provides teaching materials that address *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), **Era 3**, “Revolution and the New Nation (1754–1820s).” Lessons specifically address **Standard 2C**, which calls for an analysis of the ideas put forth arguing for women’s roles and rights during the revolutionary era.

Lessons within this unit likewise address a number of specific **Historical Thinking Standards** including: “Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative and assess its credibility” (**Standard 2**); “Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas and values” (**Standard 3**); “Identify gaps in the available records and marshal contextual knowledge and perspectives of time and place to elaborate on the evidence” (**Standard 4**); and “Identify issues and problems in the past” (**Standard 5**).

### **III. OBJECTIVES**

1. To understand that women not only comprised half the population of Revolutionary America, but were instrumental in achieving victory.
2. To explore the growing resistance in colonial America to England’s rule.
3. To appreciate that wars require enormous sacrifice by everyone involved, not just soldiers.
4. To learn that while some people fought for the independence of the colonies, others joined the struggle in the hope of creating a new, more democratic society.
5. To speculate on the surprising consequences of human actions by considering some of the unintended effects of the Revolution on the social role of women.

#### IV. INTRODUCTION TO *American Women of the Revolution*

##### **Eighteenth-Century Colonial Women**

Options for women in eighteenth-century colonial society were far more restricted than they are today. Although women's roles may seem familiar to students, two hundred years ago these familiar tasks were very different. Colonial women were supposed to be loyal helpmates to their husbands. Since the only status a woman could expect to achieve was through the man she married, nearly all colonial women married. Once married, women ceased to have any legally independent existence; under English common law they were *femes covert*, which meant that husbands were protectors as well as absolute masters. With no legally independent existence, a woman's social existence was largely defined by the position of her husband. Even a woman's property and wages accrued to the husband after marriage. Women moved through the world under the control of men—from father to husband. This system kept women from gaining autonomy. The general conviction that only economically independent people were capable of exercising the freedom of choice necessary to take a responsible role in the public arena of politics and commerce left women confined to a domestic sphere, relying on the males of their families to represent their needs. Consequently, women were locked in a system of social dependence from which there was only occasional escape.

While women were allowed only a limited public role, they were neither passive nor unimportant. Eighteenth-century women ran households and raised children. Being a good wife required an array of skills that are no longer associated with household management. In addition to cooking and cleaning, women butchered fowl they had raised, smoked meat, made cheese from the milk they had taken from the cow, sewed clothes from the cloth they had spun, made soap, and preserved vegetables they had grown. Moreover, limited technology meant that many of these chores, like laundry, were back-wrenching, tiresome, all-day jobs involving heavy hauling and firm muscles. Other jobs, like sewing, required dexterity. Usually barred by social conventions from prominent roles in commerce, women were still expected to manage the household economy.

The social significance of women became increasingly apparent to both men and women as the colonies struggled to secure their independence. During the Revolution, some skills regarded as feminine, like spinning, became more widely appreciated. The war also gave some women the opportunity to demonstrate their capacity to assume responsibilities regarded as male. For instance, many women took charge of family farms, carrying out every task from planning what, when, and how much to plant, to marketing the surplus harvest. Historians have noted that during the war, in their letters to husbands, women often changed from writing "your farm" to "our farm." This seemingly

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## Teacher Background Materials

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trivial linguistic transition marks an important shift in thinking. The Revolutionary War did not substantially change the material lives of most women; the battle for equality would be taken up by their daughters and granddaughters. But while the women's roles may actually have become more narrowly and rigidly defined after the Revolution, women's status improved. Women's intelligence and capacities were grudgingly acknowledged. Women came to have more choice in marriage; the importance of motherhood was recognized, and opportunities for education improved.

### The Revolutionary War

The part of the Revolution with which everyone is familiar was the struggle for independence. Less familiar was the struggle within America to redefine social roles and the nature and structure of society. The ethnically diverse, heterogeneous, patriotic population of the Revolutionary period was unified only in its determination to beat the British. Wealthier, better established Americans often fought for conservative reasons. They wanted to preserve their traditional rights as Englishmen, which they believed were being subverted by a corrupt British empire. The poorer folk joined the Revolution in the hope of improving their station. Many of the regulars in Washington's army had joined for cash bounties and the promise of land. Other poor people saw the war as an opportunity to realign social arrangements, forever casting off habits of deference which had been conspicuous aspects of hierarchical pre-Revolutionary America. Women joined the struggle for similarly diverse reasons. As traditional helpmates to their well-heeled husbands, some wanted to provide support and preserve the status quo being threatened by imperial England. Others sought to make their society freer, more open and fluid, thereby improving the diversity of options available to women. Still others may simply have seized the opportunity to take more public, active and respected roles in areas of society traditionally barred to them. Thus, beyond achieving national independence and formulating the political philosophy, of the new nation, the revolution also called into question long established social and political relationships and demarcated an agenda for reform that would preoccupy Americans down to the present day.

## V. LESSON PLANS

1. Daughters of Liberty
2. Women in the Revolution
3. Remember the Ladies
4. Republican Mothers