

Women in the Revolution

“Remember the ladies,” wrote Abigail Adams to her husband, John, who was attending the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. While the delegates did not name women in the Declaration of Independence, the “ladies” worked hard for independence. The Daughters of Liberty wove cloth and sewed clothing for the Continental army. Before the war, they had boycotted British imports, including tea and cloth. The success of these boycotts depended on the support of women, who were responsible for producing most of the household goods.

Phillis Wheatley was born in Africa, kidnapped by slavers when she was about seven or eight, and brought to North America. John Wheatley, a rich Boston merchant, bought her as a servant. His wife, Susannah, taught Wheatley to read and write, and she began composing poems as a teenager. Her first book of poetry was published in London in 1773. The Revolution moved her deeply because of her own position as a slave, and she composed several poems with patriotic themes, such as “On the Affray [Fighting] in King Street on the Evening of the 5th of March 1770,” which commemorates the Boston Massacre, and one about George Washington. Washington was so impressed that he invited Wheatley to visit him at his headquarters in Cambridge.

One of Wheatley’s poems is entitled “On the Death of Mr. Snider, Murder’d by Richardson” and was written in 1770 to protest the death of a teenager who was killed by a customs officer. “Mr. Snider” had been part of a crowd protesting the presence of British soldiers in Boston.

In heaven’s eternal court it was decreed
How the first martyr for the cause should bleed . . .
Wherev’r this fury [unfair treatment by the British government] darts his
Poisonous breath
All are endanger’d to the shafts of death.

Deborah Sampson and Molly Pitcher took to the battlefield as soldiers, in spite of the rules that said only men could be soldiers. Deborah Sampson enlisted in the 4th Massachusetts Regiment under the name Robert Shurtleff. Wounded twice, she took care of her own wounds so that her secret would not be discovered. However, when she became ill with a fever while stationed in Philadelphia, she was hospitalized and could no longer hide her true identity. She was honorably discharged in 1783 and received a government pension as a veteran.

Molly Pitcher’s real name was Mary Ludwig Hays McCauley. She accompanied her first husband, John Hays, a soldier in the First Pennsylvania Regiment. It was not uncommon for wives to follow their husbands’ regiments. Women performed many essential duties in the army, including nursing, cooking, and washing laundry. Documents show that women drew a ration from the army, and children drew a half ration. At the battle of Monmouth, New Jersey, on June 28, 1778, Hays was with her husband and took water in a pitcher to Continental army soldiers as they fought, thus earning the nickname Molly Pitcher. It was a very hot day and her

Teaching Idea

Some women acted as spies during the Revolutionary War. Have students make invisible ink for getting messages back and forth across enemy lines. For each student, you will need: 4 drops of onion juice, 4 drops of lemon juice, a pinch of sugar in a plastic cup, a toothpick to be used as a writing instrument, and a lamp with an exposed lightbulb.

Have students mix the concoction and then use the toothpick to write their name on a sheet of paper. When the “ink” has dried, have students take turns holding their message over the lightbulb to see their names “magically” reappear.

Caution students not to touch the lightbulb when the lamp is on.

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husband collapsed. Molly Pitcher took up her husband's gun and fought alongside the male soldiers for the rest of the battle. In 1822, the Pennsylvania legislature awarded Molly Pitcher a pension for her service at Monmouth.

Elizabeth Freeman was an African American whose husband was killed in the Revolutionary War. She thought that the liberty he had fought for should also mean freedom for black slaves. In 1781, Freeman went to court in Massachusetts. She argued that according to her state's new laws and bill of rights, she should be granted freedom. The jury agreed and set her free. Freeman's victory was an early step toward the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts.

The Quock Walker case in 1783 is credited with finally abolishing slavery there. This case was actually a series of decisions based on lawsuits brought by Walker against his owner, Nathaniel Jennison, after Jennison beat him on more than one occasion. A jury found that Walker was a free man, not a slave, and awarded him 50 pounds in damages. However, another jury overturned that verdict. Finally, the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts ruled in Walker's favor. The chief justice of the court instructed the jury to consider that slavery was incompatible with the rights that were guaranteed in the Massachusetts state constitution. Despite this, the state constitution was never actually amended to abolish slavery.

Loyalists (Tories)

The colonists were by no means united in their desire for independence. John Adams estimated that one-third were Patriots, one-third were Loyalists, and one-third were neutral. Loyalists, also known as Tories, favored reconciliation with Great Britain and continued inclusion in the British Empire. As one Loyalist wrote, "Neighbor was against neighbor, father against son." One of the more noticeable father and son rifts was between Benjamin Franklin and his son William, who was the royal governor of New Jersey and remained loyal to the king.

During the Revolutionary War, the Loyalists were not organized in the same way the Patriots were, and they were unable to provide large quantities of material support to the British army. Some Loyalists, however, did fight with the British army. In many cases after the war, Loyalists' property was confiscated without compensation by the new state governments. This retaliation by the states continued to be a source of friction between the new United States and Great Britain for some years. During and after the war, thousands of Loyalists moved to Canada. About 20,000 African Americans who had joined the British side were transported by the British to Jamaica, Nova Scotia, or Canada, rather than be returned to their owners.

Many Native Americans were also Loyalists. Their military alliance with France had helped protect them for years. They feared that if the colonies were independent, there would be no restrictions placed on them and colonists would soon move into Native American territory. The Iroquois Confederacy was split over whether to remain loyal to Britain or to fight with the colonists, and this disagreement weakened an alliance that had lasted over 200 years. Many Native Americans died while fighting the colonists, and some fled to Canada after the Revolution. As it turned out, their concerns were justified. Fighting lasted for years as colonists quickly moved into Native American territory after the Revolution, leading to disastrous results for the Native Americans.

For African Americans, the war presented both difficulties and opportunities.

Many African Americans living in the northern colonies fought for American independence. In the south, thousands of slaves took advantage of the opportunity the war provided and disappeared; thousands more accepted offers, such as Lord Dunmore's in Virginia, to fight for the Loyalists in exchange for their freedom.

After the war, southern white slaveholders gained more control and influence and were able to maintain slavery in their states. On the other hand, many northern states felt that the natural rights promised by the Declaration of Independence should be extended to everyone, and over the next 20 years most of the northern states emancipated their slaves. However, the struggle for freedom continued in the South, and it was almost 100 years before all African-American slaves were emancipated.