Fourth Edition

# THROUGH WOMEN'S EYES

## An American History
WITH DOCUMENTS

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significant, replicating the white women's role of counselor: "Within this setting, women became the principal creators of an affective style of worship and of revival culture more generally."[44] Although black women were rarely permitted to be preachers in eighteenth-century evangelical churches, they were able to create a sphere of influence and power for themselves, roles that would assume even greater importance in the nineteenth century, when the majority of slaves adopted Christianity.

## ◆ CONCLUSION: To the Margins of Political Action

Whatever their social or racial group, women living on the eastern part of the continent in the late eighteenth century were affected by the imperial conflicts that eventually resulted in the founding of a new nation. Most women's activities were filtered through traditional expectations about their female roles: slave women tried to protect their children; Native Americans maintained villages while men were at war; elite ladies sewed shirts for George Washington's army; poor women cooked for soldiers. Yet despite these traditional trajectories — and despite the fundamentally male character of eighteenth-century diplomacy, politics, and warfare — women did exercise some choice in the revolutionary era. They acted politically when they decided to escape slavery by fleeing to the British, when they participated in their Native councils' deliberations over alliances, or when they chose to be loyalists or patriots.

The revolutionary era's dramatic events affected women in widely varying ways. Slave women in the North benefited from gradual emancipation, while many in the South suffered from their owners' deepening commitment to the institution of slavery. Many Native American women saw their traditional roles erode under the pressures of assimilation, yet most scholars marvel at their resilience and adaptability. White women's positions became more limited in some respects, as white men's political rights expanded while women's remained static.

But if the Revolution did not prompt a deep-seated questioning of women's rights and roles, it did embody harbingers of change, especially for white women. The economic expansion of the new nation would lead to industrial development and an expanded presence of women in the paid workforce. The U.S. territorial expansion would not only promote western migration of white women and their families but also significantly affect Native Americans and slaves. In addition, revolutionary ideology, educational advancements, and the egalitarianism of the Great Awakening sowed the seeds for greater participation of middle-class and elite women in public life, not in politics per se, but in informal spheres of public spaces — churches, benevolent societies, and reform movements — which were to be such an important part of nineteenth-century American culture.

# PRIMARY SOURCES

## Portraits of Revolutionary Women

BY THE MIDDLE OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, portraiture flourished in America. Its success was in part a product of prosperous colonials' enthusiasm for consumer goods. Imported items — textiles, furniture, china, and books — filled their homes and served as marks of refinement. Paintings also were signs of status and taste. While artists like Charles Willson Peale, John Singleton Copley, and Benjamin West were fine painters, they owed some of their success to their ability to produce images that heightened their subjects' self-images. These men, as well as a large number of lesser painters, turned out portraits that adorned their owners' homes much like fine furnishings. This enthusiasm for portraiture produced a sizable number of images of women, many of whom were prominent in the revolutionary era.

The 1763 portrait by John Singleton Copley shown in Figure 3.1 makes Mercy Otis Warren's high status quite clear. She is dressed in a rich fabric with elegant trimmings. The picture also emphasizes her femininity. Contemporaries understood the nasturtiums entwined in her hands as symbols of fertility, and indeed she had given birth the year before she sat for this portrait and would have another child the following year.

Warren and her husband, James, a politician and prosperous merchant, lived with their five children in Boston. She was active in politics and had close ties to her colony's revolutionary leadership through her husband, her brother James Otis (also a political leader), and her friends John and Abigail Adams. In private letters, she ruminated about the propriety of women's participation in politics, writing to one friend in 1774 that she understood that the topic was "a subject . . . much out of the road of female attention." Yet, she continued, "as every domestic enjoyment depends on the decision of the mighty contest, who can be an unconcerned and silent spectator? not surely the fond mother, or the affectionate wife who trembles lest her dearest connections should fall victims of lawless power, or at least pour out the warm blood as a libation at the shrine of liberty."[45]

But Warren went far beyond the role of concerned and informed mother and wife, becoming famous for her pamphlets, poems, and plays, many of which are social satires or political commentaries. In plays such as *The Defeat* (1773) and *The Affrighted Officers* (1776), she castigated the pro-British local officials and loyalists. She also produced widely circulated poems celebrating revolutionary exploits such as the Boston Tea Party and exhorting women to uphold the boycotts against British goods. After the war, she published two major works. With *Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous* (1790), she became one of three American women to have published

◆ **Figure 3.1 John Singleton Copley, *Mercy Otis Warren* (1763)**
*Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts, USA/Bequest of Winslow Warren/Bridgeman Images.*

a book of poems, joining Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley. Her 1805 *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution,* a monumental three-volume work, reflected Warren's deep commitment to the cause of the Revolution and her hope for America's future as a repository of republican virtue.

Consider Warren's bearing and pose in this portrait. What sort of personality do they suggest? How does Copley reveal Warren as a woman of many accomplishments?

Figure 3.2, a portrait of Phillis Wheatley (see Primary Sources: "Phillis Wheatley, Poet and Slave," pp. 140–44), was not intended as an ornament for her



home or that of her masters. Rather, it was commissioned as the frontispiece for her book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773). Wheatley's owner had sent the poems to London bookseller Archibald Bell, who in turn had taken them to an antislavery noblewoman, the Countess of Huntington, to receive permission for Wheatley to dedicate the book to her, a common practice designed to enhance a book's prestige. Huntington, enthusiastic about the poems, apparently asked for reassurance that the author was "*real,* without a deception." Perhaps to offer proof to future readers that Wheatley was indeed a black slave, the countess requested a picture of Wheatley for the frontispiece. The painting was executed by another slave, Scipio Moorhead, owned by a Boston minister, and sent to England for engraving. Wheatley appreciated Moorhead's talents as an artist and wrote the following poem to "SM. a young *African* painter":

◆ **Figure 3.2 Scipio Moorhead, *Phillis Wheatley* (1773)**
*The Granger Collection, New York.*

> To show the lab'ring bosom's deep intent,
> and though in living characters to paint,
> When first thy pencil did those beauties give,
> And breathing figures learnt from thee to live,
> How did those prospects give my soul delight,
> A new creation rushing on my sight?
> Still, wond'rous youth! each noble path pursue,
> On deathless glories fix thine ardent view:
> Still may the painter's and the poet's fire
> To aid thy pencil, and thy verse conspire![46]

Why do you think Wheatley was so pleased by the portrait? Why do you suppose the painting includes the information that Wheatley was "servant to Mr. John Wheatley"?

Mum Bett, later Elizabeth Freeman (Figure 3.3), was born a slave, either in New York or Massachusetts, and eventually became the property of Colonel John Ashley of Sheffield, Massachusetts. In 1781, Mum Bett sued her master for her freedom. Her case, *Brom and Bett v. Ashley,* was one of several cases in Massachusetts that in 1783 led to the state supreme court's ruling that slavery was invalid in the state. Historians are not certain what circumstances led Mum Bett

to her unusual course of action. One story, possibly apocryphal, indicates that she ran away from Ashley's home after receiving a blow from a heated shovel. A later account by novelist Catherine Sedgwick, the daughter of Freeman's lawyer Theodor Sedgwick, claimed that Freeman made her decision after hearing the Declaration of Independence. It is also possible that she and her fellow slave Brom were chosen by prominent men interested in testing the constitutionality of slavery in Massachusetts. After her freedom, Mum Bett adopted the name Elizabeth

◆ Figure 3.3 **Susan Anne Livingston Ridley Sedgwick, *Elizabeth Freeman ("Mum Bett")* (1811)**
*The Granger Collection, New York.*



Freeman and spent the rest of her life as a beloved paid servant to the Sedgwick family. When she died in 1829, Catherine Sedgwick's brother, Charles, wrote the following epitaph for her tombstone: "She was born a slave and remained a slave for nearly thirty years. She could neither read nor write, yet in her own sphere she had no superior nor equal. She neither wasted time nor property. She never violated a trust, nor failed to perform a duty. In every situation of domestic trial, she was the most efficient helper, and the tenderest friend. Good Mother, farewell."[47]

The watercolor portrait in Figure 3.3 was painted in 1811 by Susan Sedgwick, Catherine's sister-in-law. Freeman's dress is vivid blue, and she wears what is apparently a gold necklace around her neck. Why do you suppose the Sedgwick family made the effort (through the portrait and the poem) to document Freeman's life? What is the artist hoping to convey about Freeman in this portrait?

◆ Figure 3.4 ***Jemima Wilkinson***
*Library of Congress. From Memoir of Jemima Wilkinson, 1844.*

The turning point in Jemima Wilkinson's life came in October 1776 when she fell ill from a fever. When she recovered, she announced that she had died and been resurrected. She renamed herself Public Universal Friend and, as the text notes (see pp. 123–24), became a charismatic evangelical preacher who emphasized the golden rule of treating others as one wishes to be treated. Her followers had numerous congregations in Rhode Island and Connecticut; in 1785 they established a Friend's community in the frontier region of New York, where Wilkinson hoped they might be free from the worldly evils.

The lithograph of Wilkinson, at the age of sixty-three, in Figure 3.4 was based on a painting by John L. D. Mathies. It gives us a glimpse of the self-styled prophetess. Wilkinson's insistence on obliterating her sex went beyond her refusal to answer to her name and her insistence that her followers avoid the feminine pronouns of "she" and "her" when referring to their leader. After hearing her preach in New Haven, Connecticut, one critical observer described her in 1787 as wearing "a light cloth Cloke with a Cape like a Man's — Purple Gown, long' sleeves to Wristbands — Mans shirt down to the Hands with neckband — purple

◆ **Figure 3.5 Joseph Stone, *Deborah Sampson* (1797)**
*The Granger Collection, New York.*

handkerchief or Neckcloth tied around the neck like a man's — No Cap — Hair combed turned over & not long — wears a Watch — Man's Hat."[48]

How does the artist present Wilkinson's gender in this portrait? Although Wilkinson's style of dress may have stemmed from her religious belief that she had died and been resurrected and thereby transcended her sex, why else might she have preferred male attire?

Deborah Sampson, depicted in Figure 3.5, shared two things in common with Jemima Wilkinson. Like Wilkinson, she had been profoundly influenced by religious revivalism and became a Baptist in 1780. But her Middleborough,



Massachusetts, church expelled her in 1780 for "dressing in men's clothes, and enlisting as a Soldier in the Army."[49] Sampson's cross-dressing may have dated to her days as an indentured servant, when she apparently sometimes performed farm labor, traditionally done by men, dressed in men's clothes.

At age eighteen, her period of indenture concluded, she became a masterless woman, an unusual status in the colonial era, having neither husband, father, nor a master to whom she was bound. This gave her rare freedom for a woman, and she moved from town to town, working sometimes as a teacher, sometimes as a weaver. Perhaps this freedom contributed to her startling course of action.

Beginning in 1782, for eighteen months, Sampson assumed men's clothing and the name Robert Shurtleff while she served as a soldier in the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment in the American Revolution. She was wounded twice before being discovered and honorably discharged. With the help of her friend Paul Revere, she later was successful in obtaining a small military pension from the U.S. Congress. Shortly after the war, Sampson married and had three children. Then in 1802, she once again flouted convention by becoming a public lecturer. Dressed in a uniform and carrying a musket, she gave public talks about her military service and performed gun drills. Although she appeared at times apologetic for her "uncouth actions," she also pronounced, "I burst the tyrant bonds which held my sex in awe and clandestinely or by stealth, grasped an opportunity which custom and the world seemed to deny, as a natural privilege."[50]

Joseph Stone painted Sampson's portrait in 1797 under the commission of author Herman Mann, who used the imagery in the frontispiece of his book, *The Female Review: or Memoirs of an American Lady.* Mann interviewed Sampson for his book, although scholars argue that Mann invented many details to make for an even more dramatic story. He emphasized Sampson's desire for patriotic service but was careful not to dwell on her "masculine" qualities. He also took pains to stress her chastity, which "she had been taught to revere, even as dear as life itself."[51] Why do you think that Mann chose to feature a portrait depicting Sampson as a genteel young woman? How might this image of Sampson have fit with the contemporary call for Republican Motherhood? Based on what you have read, how do you think Sampson would have reacted to such an image?

## QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. How do the portraits presented here differ from one another? What factors might account for those differences?
2. How realistic are the portrayals of the women in these portraits? Are portrayals by professional artists more or less accurate, do you think, than the portrayals by amateur artists?
3. What roles do dress, props, and background play in defining the characteristics of the sitter?