



## Women in the American Revolution with Mary Beth Norton and Rosemarie Zagarri

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**[0:00:00.2] Julie Silverbrook:** From the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, this is We the People.

[music]

**[0:00:08.1] Julie Silverbrook:** I'm Julie Silverbrook, Chief Content and Learning Officer. The National Constitution Center is a nonpartisan nonprofit chartered by Congress to increase awareness and understanding of the U.S. Constitution among the American people. In this episode, we explore how women's experiences and contributions deepen and expand our understanding of America's founding. Joining the conversation are acclaimed historians Mary Beth Norton, the Mary Donlon Alger Professor Emeritus of American History at Cornell University, and Rosie Zagarri, Distinguished University Professor of History at George Mason University.

[music]

**[0:00:42.3] Julie Silverbrook:** I want to kick off first with a focus on more recent scholarship that has broadened the lens to show how women were participating in the revolutionary era in ways that shaped the political culture of the new nation. Mary Beth, when we look at the American Revolution through the lens of women's history, what changes about the traditional story of the founding era?

**[0:01:06.6] Mary Beth Norton:** Well, I think so much of our thought about the Revolution, and this actually includes the recent Ken Burns documentary, is all about military history. And when you focus on women, or at least consider women as an important part of the story, the military focus goes away. And what instead you focus on is social history. You focus on the impact of the war on families, on women, on children, on men who were and were not in the army, and you get an entirely different picture, I think, of the role of the Revolution in people's lives. It's not as though there are armies marching through the countryside and fighting with each other, and then nothing is happening because of those armies, other than the armies are fighting. So just for example, one of the things you learn if you study the Revolution is that wherever the armies went, smallpox followed and people were endangered by the very presence of the armies. And also wherever the British army went, enslaved people ran away to join them because the British were offering freedom to slaves. And so the upshot is that when you draw a wider picture, even when you focus on the military, you get a completely different sense of what's happening.

**[0:02:36.4] Julie Silverbrook:** Rosie, I want to give you a chance to weigh in on this as well.

**[0:02:39.6] Rosemarie Zagarri:** Okay. I'd like to concentrate maybe on the pre-revolutionary

period and just emphasize the extent to which the American Revolution was a bottom-up sort of grassroots movement. It started as a popular protest and it was widespread. It wasn't just among the educated elites. And so it wasn't just these white male politicians in the colonial legislatures who decided, oh, Britain is bad. They thought that. But then they had to reach out and get support, and they had to get support from ordinary white men and non-voters. They had to get support from women. And one of their most effective tactics in the period after the Stamp Act of 1765 until the Revolution in 1776 was the boycott. And to make those boycotts against Britain effective, where Americans refused to purchase British goods, they knew they needed the support of as many consumers as possible and that included women. And so you begin to see in this period a lot of outreach to non-voting men and to women to get support for this popular bottom-up grassroots protest against Great Britain. And so I think it really helps you understand that these are not just airy minded, abstract ideals that people began to be upset about, that it was ordinary conditions in their daily lives that they felt were threatened by these changing British policies, beginning with taxation without representation.

**[0:04:27.5] Mary Beth Norton:** And I think that's really important. I mean, one of the things that's fun is to look for the documents that were signed by people to say we're not going to buy tea or we're not going to buy something else, we're not going to buy imported clothing. And because women were the people, of course, who were doing the shopping, I mean, then as now, women were the ones who went to the stores. And so if you were going to succeed, if you were a guy who wanted to get resistance to Britain going, one of the things you had to do was to get women... was to persuade women to join. And a lot of women didn't need persuading. I mean, that is, they were right there. They saw that it was very important to align themselves with these boycotts. And so you get documents that women actually sign. And that's one of the few times when women are taking a public stance in this period by signing on and saying, yes, I agree, I will not buy X product that is imported from Britain.

**[0:05:29.3] Julie Silverbrook:** Rosie, a lot of the participation from women during this era takes place outside of formal institutions and formal politics at that grassroots level. So boycotts are one prominent example. What are some of the other examples of women engaging this kind of intentional political activity at the grassroots level?

**[0:05:48.6] Rosemarie Zagarri:** Well, I think we just, we historians need evidence to support our claims. And unfortunately a lot of the evidence that survived was collected because it was related to prominent men. So we don't have as much evidence about and from women as we'd like. But American women, white American women, were highly literate and a lot of them could read and write. A majority of white women in the north could read and write. And so what we have as historians I think is the tip of an iceberg of what is happening in a change of consciousness among women as they are reading in their newspapers, listening to their neighbors, hearing about the cause of liberty, hearing their husbands and brothers and sons, start to take up arms, start to talk about the need to defend their liberties, and they're starting to understand and process for themselves, what does tyranny mean in my own life? And a lot of them started doing something that was very unexpected, which is they started applying it to their own lives and say, hmm, maybe the men in my lives are rather tyrannical too. [laughter] And so... but what we do know is that in newspapers, we see poetry addressed to women asking them to join in the patriot cause.

**[0:07:21.1] Rosemarie Zagarri:** We see women writing in letters to one another and to their husbands about their understanding of resistance against Great Britain, about identifying with the patriot movement. And you start to get a few very educated women, like Mercy Otis Warren, like the Black woman Phillis Wheatley, start to write and publish their writings, and you begin to see then, and again I think it's just the tip of the iceberg, how women's consciousness about being political actors starts to change during the Revolutionary period. Men are inviting them into

political participation, and they are responding by starting to act politically and think of themselves as political. And I just want to emphasize that this is a very striking and different development from previous political movements in world history, I would even say.

**[0:08:19.7] Mary Beth Norton:** And I'll just comment, that one of the things that women did was to make spinning a political act. Because one of the things that young women in particular did, as I discovered, was to be assigned to be the spinners of the household. Especially if it was a poor household and they couldn't really afford that much imported clothing or imported, say, bed, clothes or whatever, they would assign the young women in the household to spin. And...

**[0:08:54.0] Julie Silverbrook:** Which, by the way, is not like spinning in an exercise class.

[laughter]

**[0:08:59.4] Mary Beth Norton:** No.

**[0:08:59.5] Julie Silverbrook:** It is making homespun clothing, for anyone who wasn't understanding the reference.

**[0:09:04.4] Mary Beth Norton:** Yeah, it's actually working a whirl... sorry, I can't say it. A wool wheel or a flax wheel. And I can say, by the way, a flax wheel is really hard to do. I have tried spinning, it's tough. You have to be an expert to do it. But young women were assigned this job, and it was a boring job, but it was important if the family was going to have, for example, handkerchiefs or socks or whatever. And so, the... But what happened was women started to create groups that would meet publicly and spin publicly. And they would... And there are a number of newspaper accounts of these groups, especially in 1767 and 1768 and 1769, which is the height of the boycott movements to where women would gather publicly and they would... With their spinning wheels. So they would have to carry their spinning wheels to some central location, maybe in the town square or maybe at the home of the minister. Sometimes the home of the minister served as the place for this to happen. And they would then do very explicit, symbolic things in addition to spinning. They would share edifying thoughts and political ideas. They would only drink American teas, not imported tea. They would only eat American foods.

**[0:10:32.3] Mary Beth Norton:** And it was all intended to be an episode in public education. And the newspapers really loved this. And there are lots of reports of these groups. One of the problems we don't know, when Rosie talked about a lack of evidence, we don't know if these groups ever met without publicity. I mean, are there groups that meet and nobody wrote about it? Or is the only reason that we know about them is because they were organized and they told the local reporter, come to the minister's house we're going to have a spinning bee that day. So we just don't know. But we do know that these were episodes of political propaganda. They were women taking a very standard female occupation, that is, taking care of a spinning wheel, that was the ultimate... you know, a woman who was a spinster was a woman who spun things. And they made this a symbolic... they made this symbolic female occupation into a political statement. And that really changes things. As Rosie said, it makes... it brings women's domestic life into political life.

**[0:11:48.9] Rosemarie Zagari:** Yes, and I think that's very important, even without the vote. And these women are calling themselves, in some cases, Daughters of Liberty. You know, there are groups of men who are calling themselves Sons of Liberty. Women now are starting to call themselves Daughters of Liberty. And again, you know, it's a raising of political consciousness that I think is something very different than we've seen, at least, certainly in Western political history, about the role of women in resistance movements or then in the cause of independence.

**[0:12:23.3] Mary Beth Norton:** And one of the things I found what was really interesting was a letter written by three women who used pseudonyms. I have no idea who they were, but who attacked in Boston newspapers the men who had parodied the women. There were parodies written by young... It's known who one of them was. He was a Harvard student, of course, wrote a nasty account, a nasty parody of these women who were making these kinds of political comments, these political statements. And so they wrote to respond to that and to other nasty comments that were made in the newspapers about what they were doing and how unimportant what they were doing was. So they knew he was a young kid, and so they really slammed him in the response that they made. It's very clever. And they say we will match our patriotism against anyone. I wish I knew who these three women were. I have no idea. They used three female names. There's no indication of who they were. But it was a very powerful statement of the right of women to make political arguments and statements in 1760s Boston.

**[0:13:35.3] Rosemarie Zagarri:** And I would just like to emphasize, it's hard for us to understand this today because we know women are far from having complete and full equality with men. But back in the Revolutionary era in Anglo America, women were... most women grew up to be married, and once they were married, they could not own their own property, they could not sue or be sued in court. They had no separate legal identity. And politics was regarded as a strictly male sphere, and it was regarded as transgressing into male territory for women to think or act politically. And so I just want to emphasize that what women were doing and what they were being asked to do by men was something very different. And really, even though they were still acting through their roles as wives and mothers, they were acting politically in ways that they hadn't done before.

**[0:14:39.2] Julie Silverbrook:** I want to shift us from talking about the extraordinary political activities of ordinary women to looking at the extraordinary intellectual activities of extraordinary women. And so there are many women who are certainly lesser known than their male counterparts, but people like Mercy Otis Warren, Catharine Macaulay, and just to shout out, we did a great podcast last week with Sarah Giorgini and Mary Bilder on the relationship between Mercy Otis Warren and Catharine Macaulay, Judith Sargent Murray, Phillis Wheatley and others who were widely read both in the American colonies and in Great Britain. And they were often correspondents with a lot of the really significant male figures of this period, the Thomas Jeffersons, George Washingtons and John Adamses of the world. And they were engaging directly with questions of liberty, virtue, political authority. And they were also critical, Mercy Otis Warren, famously critical of the Constitution, in part for not having a bill of rights. So I wanted to spend a little bit of time talking about these extraordinary women who should get more due, more credit for their incredible influence in this really rich intellectual moment for the country.

**[0:16:00.7] Mary Beth Norton:** Well, I'll refer to Rosie, who's written about Mercy Otis Warren, but let me... Before you talk about Mercy Otis Warren, let me say a few words about Judith Sargent Murray, who nobody knows anything about. And she was basically the American equivalent of Mary Wollstonecraft. She wrote about the equality of women and the need for women to get equal education in the US starting as early as during the war itself in 1779. And she was an incredibly powerful writer and an incredibly powerful thinker that frankly I knew nothing about before I started to work on women and the Revolutionary era because she was so obscure. And here is the point of Rosie's about sources. We all thought that all of Judith Sargent Murray's papers had been destroyed. That was believed by people back in the 1930s. She had a nephew who became the governor of Mississippi territory. She moved out there, and it was thought that all her papers were lost. No, they were found in an attic of a house in, I don't know where in Mississippi, but somewhere. Oxford, Mississippi, I think. Anyway, they are now being... they're now in the course of being transcribed and published. And so we're going to know a lot more about her when that work is done. So, anyway, over to Rosie, talk about somebody we knew about. We knew about Mercy Otis Warren.

**[0:17:28.7] Rosemarie Zagarri:** Yeah, well... You say we... how many people have heard about Mercy Otis Warren?

**[0:17:32.4] Julie Silverbrook:** But that's because they listen to the podcast.

[overlapping conversation]

**[0:17:35.2] Rosemarie Zagarri:** Yeah. And how many people have heard about Abigail Adams? Okay, so the point is that, why do you know about Abigail Adams? Abigail Adams was an incredible woman, but we know about her because she was married to a famous man, to John Adams, who became vice president, diplomat to France and England, and then president, and was the mother of a president. But these other women often wrote... They often wrote privately at first and then publicly, and at first they published pseudonymously.

**[0:18:09.6] Mary Beth Norton:** Anonymously.

**[0:18:09.7] Rosemarie Zagarri:** They did not write under their own names. And that wasn't just because they were a woman. At this time, there were very strict libel laws in the colonies and in Great Britain. And so it was rather, you could get into legal trouble if you published something politically scandalous. In any case, what happened with Judith Sargent Murray that Mary Beth was talking about is she started taking the ideas of the Revolution and as I suggest, applying them to herself. Abigail Adams did that, but she did that in a letter to her husband when she said, remember the ladies, but Judith Sargent Murray said, oh, men and women are equal. The sexes are equal.

**[0:18:59.3] Rosemarie Zagarri:** But what did she mean by equal? Well, that is a big question. But what she started to become convinced about was that men and women had the same abilities, intellect and achievement. And during the course of the Revolution, many other women, including Abigail Adams, started becoming more confident of themselves because while their husbands were away fighting or serving in the Legislature, they had to take on the responsibilities of taking care of the home and the family and the servants and/or slaves. And they started realizing that they could do it, and they started realizing that there were limits on their freedom, too, and so they started writing about it. Now, Mercy Otis Warren was exceptional because she had a very, very sophisticated education. And before the Revolution, she started writing political poetry and plays that were published in Massachusetts newspapers. And her husband, and John Adams, who was a family friend, encouraged her to do so. But they told her to do so because she would help the patriot cause. She had a gift with her pen. And they weren't so interested in her promoting the cause of women. And she wasn't actually herself, but she was interested in using her pen to get people excited about the Revolution, to get people ready to defend their liberties, to get people to fight for the Revolutionary cause. But even her husband said that she had what he called, and this is a quote, a masculine genius. A masculine genius. That's the extent to which politics was regarded as a strictly male realm. So it was very brave for a woman like Mercy Otis Warren to do this. Phillis Wheatley, an enslaved woman. Do you want to talk about Phillis Wheatley, Mary Beth?

**[0:21:04.1] Julie Silverbrook:** Mary Beth...

**[0:21:04.3] Mary Beth Norton:** Yeah, sure.

**[0:21:05.0] Rosemarie Zagarri:** Yeah.

[laughter]

**[0:21:07.2] Mary Beth Norton:** I was waiting for you to. But that's all right. Yeah. I mean, Phillis Wheatley is a fascinating case because she was recognized as a genius while she was enslaved. And she did publish very patriotic poetry as an enslaved woman in Massachusetts, which is stunning. And she wrote in praise of George Washington, for example, and she allied herself with the cause of the Revolution. It's really unfortunate, she died as quite a young woman, and so... And we only recently have learned a lot about, again, lost sources. Nina Dayton, a scholar at University of Connecticut, found material about her marriage, about her husband, about her subsequent life after the Revolution and before her death, before her early death, in some obscure local records in Massachusetts that she was looking at for some other reason completely. And there was Phillis Wheatley and her husband, John Peters. So we actually know a lot more about her life now, personal life, beyond the poetry, than we did before. But it's... There's still things to be found I guess I would say.

**[0:22:27.8] Julie Silverbrook:** Check your attics. You don't know...

[overlapping conversation]

**[0:22:29.0] Rosemarie Zagarri:** I think that's a good lesson there.

**[0:22:30.6] Mary Beth Norton:** Yeah.

**[0:22:31.0] Rosemarie Zagarri:** But I just think it's so remarkable that this young enslaved girl was encouraged to learn to read and write by her mistress in Boston. She proved to be a genius, and the... her owners actually allowed her to publish her poetry. And again, when the Revolution came, she identified as a patriot. She wrote these poems celebrating George Washington, and George Washington actually invited her to visit him. And so it's just extraordinary how the Revolution had these unintended consequences. This is true of enslaved people more generally, who started running away, who started wanting their own freedom. But women, too, they felt like these ideas of liberty, of subjugation, of oppression, they apply to me too, in my condition, and maybe I should do something about it.

**[0:23:32.5] Mary Beth Norton:** In my own research, I read lots and lots of correspondence that was exchanged between husbands and wives during the war. I mean, one of the... When I first started to work on Women and the Revolution, people said, oh, there aren't enough sources. But of course, one of the problems, or one of the issues that helps historians is that husbands and wives were separated by the war for one reason or another. And therefore, things that would have been discussed over the kitchen table are instead put on paper. And so you learn all kinds of things about the relationships of men and women that you would not learn otherwise. And I'll give you two really interesting examples. One is the correspondence of a New Hampshire congressman who started writing letters to his wife saying, do this about my farming business. And she would write back, your farming business. But then, guess what? It became our farming business in their correspondence, as he and she both recognized that she had a part of it. Now, what's really interesting is that with John and Abigail, exactly the same transition occurred, but in that one, it went to Abigail saying, my farming business.

[laughter]

**[0:24:48.1] Mary Beth Norton:** So it's shows you something about why she was important. But another piece of correspondence that I especially liked was with Henry Knox, who was general of artillery for Washington and whose wife was actually from a Loyalist family, but was very committed to the Revolution and committed to him. And they had a variety of exchanges during the war. And the letter that I particularly love is she said something like, you're accustomed to your

command in the army, but when you come home, I hope you will think there is such a thing as equal command. [laughter] Of course, we don't know what happened when he went home, but...

**[0:25:27.1] Julie Silverbrook:** Well, they were together again. They weren't exchanging letters...

[overlapping conversation]

**[0:25:29.6] Mary Beth Norton:** They were together again. And so they didn't write to each other. And one... I'll make one other comment, and this has to do with a set of letters that I found at the Library of Congress. And they were wonderful letters. And on the outs, there was a wrapper, a contemporary wrapper around them. And it said, old, uninteresting letters of my parents may be discarded, but fortunately it wasn't. It ended up at the Library of Congress for historians to look at.

**[0:25:55.1] Rosemarie Zagari:** Well, and Mary Beth, I mean, one of the most remarkable things that happens, too, is that husbands and wives start to disagree.

**[0:26:02.2] Mary Beth Norton:** Oh, absolutely. Right.

**[0:26:03.0] Rosemarie Zagari:** And we have husbands who are Loyalists and wives who are Patriots and vice versa.

**[0:26:08.7] Mary Beth Norton:** And vice versa. Right.

**[0:26:08.8] Rosemarie Zagari:** And I think that's a really important development, too, because the norm was wives were supposed to be subordinate to their husbands, submissive to their husbands, deferential. But with the coming of the... and obviously it's not all women, it's not all families, but, you know, we have a sufficient amount of evidence to show us, I think, again, that this is just the tip of an iceberg.

**[0:26:31.4] Julie Silverbrook:** I do want to talk a little bit about the variety of experiences that women of different races, status, and locations had during the war. So enslaved women, free Black women, and Native women all faced very different circumstances than people like Abigail Adams. Mary Beth, I'll start with you for this one. How did the Revolution affect these different groups of women, and how did their stories broaden or complicate our understanding of the period?

**[0:26:59.3] Mary Beth Norton:** Well, I think one of the most interesting things that I found was that if you look at records of enslaved people who ran away from plantations, before the war, basically they were almost all men. During the war, they were women and children who ran to the British Army. And that was because, as I said earlier, the British army offered freedom to slaves. They expected actually to be offering the freedom to male slaves because they wanted to use their labor, but women took advantage of it. And so many women ran away with their children. One reason why women didn't run away before was because they had children. They didn't want to leave the children. And so the Revolution really changed the patterns of enslaved... Of the lives of enslaved people who ran away. Now, as for free Black women, it's very hard to find their information, but I can say that there is some new scholarship coming out by a wonderful young scholar named Lauren Duval, who has worked on a particular problem. She has worked on the issue of what happens in American cities when they are occupied by the British army during the Revolution, and what does that do to American households.

**[0:28:18.2] Mary Beth Norton:** And one of the things she discovered is that in those households, shall we say, servant women, whether they were free or enslaved and whatever race they were, tended to become, guess what? More uppity. [laughter] Because the male leadership of the

household was in question. Because the... either they were gone, either they were rebels and they were off in the army, or they were off somewhere else, or they were being subsumed under the power of the occupying British army so they could not control the situation. It's a fascinating study, and I think the book will be published very soon. I'm not sure, but it's... People can look out for that, I... Alas, I don't recall the title of it. Do you recall her title?

**[0:29:06.2] Rosemarie Zagarri:** No.

**[0:29:06.3] Mary Beth Norton:** Anyway, the author is Lauren Duval, so I would say that's something to pay attention to. And as for Native women, a lot depended on what the role their particular nation chose. And of course, many of the Native groups in the colonies chose to align with the British because the British had been their major protector in the war, in the period before the war, it was the American settlers who wanted the land that the Native people had. And the British Indian agents were the ones who pretended to protect them. And so more Native groups aligned themselves with the British during the war than with the Americans. And that affected the women as well as the men of those Nations.

**[0:29:59.2] Julie Silverbrook:** I want to talk a little bit about the concept of republican motherhood or republican womanhood, and this notion that women could contribute to civic life in the early United States after the Revolution. This is something you've written extensively about, Mary Beth, so we'll start with you.

**[0:30:21.3] Mary Beth Norton:** Well, yeah, the... I think that it's important to... I mean, everybody talks about republican motherhood, and that's very important. I mean, there was an argument for the creation of households that said, basically, if every Republican boy can grow up to become president, then every republican mother has to be able to educating him, of taking care of him properly. But it's not just motherhood. It's also wifedom. Because, again, in the period after the war, it wasn't just women. It was also men who recognized that women could have equivalent, if not exactly equal roles in the household and that wives would play an important part in maintaining the republic. Because if you read about... You read what people are concerned about, about establishing a republic, remember, we've got people who are giving up monarchy. They're giving up being subjects. And to become citizens. And to become citizens means basically everybody having to bear burdens that they were not necessarily required to bear before, they were going to have particular responsibilities. And so therefore, women, as well as men, had to be educated. And one of the things that I found most interesting in my own research was the tremendous emphasis on women's education that develops after the Revolution. And it's all because of this notion that in a republic, women have to be good citizens. And not just in the household, but as we've been talking about, in the public realm as well.

**[0:32:03.9] Rosemarie Zagarri:** I'd just like to build on that a little bit and emphasize that this shift from a republic, I mean, from a monarchy under England to a republic, small "R" republic, transformed the way Americans thought about their roles and rights and responsibilities in this new government. And I think we don't think about that enough. We just throw around the term citizenship. But I think it's especially pertinent this time. In a monarchy, it was thought that the crown, the monarch was the ultimate repository safeguarding the people's rights and liberties. But that in a self governing system, a republic, that all the people bore the burden of governing themselves. And even non-voters, even non-voting white males, even women, should have a role to play in that new form of government. And you get a general push toward greater emphasis on education in the post Revolutionary period. This is why in the Northwest ordinance, in the areas that became Ohio and other new places, west of the Appalachian mountains, there's land set aside for schools. Because in this new form of government, you needed people who knew about their government, who knew about their world, who would be informed about it and would be active,

participatory citizens in this new government so that they would be virtuous and vigilant and safeguard their liberties.

**[0:33:50.7] Rosemarie Zagarri:** I mean, I think that connection between education and a small “R” republican form of government self governing system is just absolutely essential. And I think what's amazing is that because women had played a significant role during the American Revolution, that men recognized, they talked about women being patriotic in a manner befitting their sex. In a manner befitting their sex. And I mean, I think in some ways that may sound a little patronizing to us, but in fact it was a recognition of the incredible contributions women made in supporting the home front while men were gone, in making sacrifices in their daily lives for this cause, in making sure that they suffered along with their husbands and sons. And don't forget, this was a civil war and women were short of food, women were raped, women suffered greatly in their daily lives because of this war and men recognized that. And part of this new change in perception that women could make a contribution in this new form of government was a recognition that they had done so much during the Revolution. And by saying that women have a role to play, they will be educating the future citizens, they will be encouraging their husbands to vote or to serve in the military. That this was saying this role for women, this political participation doesn't stop with the Revolution. It started with the Revolution. And so I think it's really important, especially even today, to be reminded of civic responsibilities of the role virtue of in safeguarding our rights and liberties. And I think women were thought to have a particular role in raising the new generation and encouraging their husbands and sons to participate as, even more actively than they could.

**[0:35:58.8] Mary Beth Norton:** Yeah, I agree completely with that statement. And I think that the issue very much is the, again, I want to underscore this fact that we don't fully, I think, understand what it was like to have always thought of yourself as a subject, which is the way people thought of themselves before the Revolution. And people wrote about being a good subject. That was their goal.

**[0:36:26.1] Rosemarie Zagarri:** Loyal to Britain.

**[0:36:27.3] Mary Beth Norton:** Loyal to Britain, exactly. And in this case, that all switched. And, so suddenly it was to become a good citizen. And to become a good citizen, you had to have different kinds of attributes. And one of those attributes was to learn not just how to read and write, but to learn your history, to learn your geography. So one of the really interesting things is that in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, you begin to get the first histories of America, the first geographies written for use in these new schools. And you begin to get women who have never been able to go beyond what we would call an elementary education before being able to have the equivalent of what we might call a high school education. And men, too. The idea was the expansion of education because obviously men had to be educated to be good citizens as well as women had to be educated to be good citizens.

**[0:37:31.8] Julie Silverbrook:** I want to leave some time for audience questions which I see getting passed around, but I want to close asking a question about the fact that despite all of these openings for women, the realm of political participation for them narrows fairly quickly after the Revolution. And, Rosie, you've obviously written a wonderful book about this, but I want to start with you Mary Beth, I know that you have some really intriguing thoughts to share on this as well.

**[0:38:04.4] Rosemarie Zagarri:** Well...

**[0:38:05.0] Mary Beth Norton:** Rosie, talk first.

**[0:38:05.9] Rosemarie Zagarri:** Yeah. So when people today look at the American Revolution,

they generally say, oh, but women didn't get the right to vote, and they wouldn't get that right for a long time afterward, right? Except in one place in New Jersey, because at the start of the Revolution in 1776, the Continental Congress told each newly emerging state to write its own constitution. And each state could decide which people could vote. And in the state of New Jersey, unbelievably, they used the language, gender, what we call gender neutral language, and allowed anyone who possessed a certain amount of property to vote. And they said... They used the word inhabitant. And what's amazing about New Jersey is that in subsequent years, this was 1776, in 1790 and 1797, they passed enabling legislation about suffrage that specified voters and referred to he and she. And so we know that the legislators of New Jersey wanted to enfranchise women, and they did enfranchise women. And that women in New Jersey voted. And we know from the records of voting from this time, that women did vote. Now, who could vote is a big question. At this time, voting was attribute of propertied males.

**[0:39:47.8] Rosemarie Zagarri:** And so only women with property could vote. But remember, married women couldn't own property. So we're a little catch 22 here. But that did leave a group of women, unmarried women or widows. And widows could and did vote in measurable numbers in New Jersey between 1776 and 1807, such that it caused consternation in the newspapers. They were affecting the outcome of elections, or men were disguising themselves as women so they could catch... they could cast extra ballots. And so this led in 1807 to the disenfranchisement of women, along with the disenfranchisement of free Blacks who met the property of qualification for voting. I want to emphasize here that this is not the women's rights movement of the 1840s or of the 20th century. It's an extension of that principle of no taxation without representation. If you pay taxes on your property, you should be allowed to vote. Widows paid taxes, so they should be allowed to vote. So it was tried. It was an experiment in New Jersey, and it was so radical that nobody liked it. Well, maybe that's exaggeration, but it was very controversial. A lot of women didn't like it. It was violating feminine norms of femininity and modesty and transgressing into that male realm.

**[0:41:23.2] Rosemarie Zagarri:** And so in 1807, the legislature took back that vote from women. But this is emblematic of a larger pattern. After this discussion of women's rights and roles during the Revolution and the post Revolutionary period, after some discussions about how could we expand those rights, what does equality for women mean? There was a period of retrenchment, and we begin to see in the 1820s and '30s much more rhetoric about separating men's and women's spheres, that women belong in the domestic realm, that men's and women's realms are separate but equal, and women don't need to be political. And so I just want to emphasize how radical, again, the idea of women participating in politics during the Revolution was. And I think we've seen this over and over again throughout our history. Whenever there is a serious challenge to gender roles, to the ideas of motherhood, womanhood that threatens the existing social structure, there's a backlash, there is a retrenchment, there's an effort to go back to more traditional roles. And I would say all was not lost because those ideas, once unleashed, had a life of their own. And that experiment of women voting in New Jersey lived on in public memory, but it took quite a while for women to actually achieve that right to vote. But they did continue to participate politically in other non-voting kinds of ways through charitable organizations, reform movements, temperance movement, anti-slavery movement. And that's not nothing, it's just it did take quite a while to recover the vote.

**[0:43:10.4] Mary Beth Norton:** Let me just say that I have a slight disagreement with the way that Rosie just described the pattern. You said that they used... that the... when they wrote the New Jersey constitution, they used gender neutral language. Right, they did. And that was because I think that it didn't even occur to them that women could possibly have claimed the right to vote. And I mean, I think the men who wrote the New Jersey Constitution in 1776 just didn't think about it. And what to me is really interesting is that women thought about it. That is, women later realized that there was this gender neutral language that they could take advantage of. And so when that famous law was in fact adopted in New Jersey in 1797, what it did was to validate what women were

already doing. That is women who could read, read the New Jersey constitution and said, hey, I've got enough property, I can have the right to vote. And so the men then had to admit it. And they did that for a while until in 1807, they took the vote away by claiming that the women were involved in a fraudulent election. Whereas in fact, of course, it was the men who were voting early and often and it was the women who were... Who... And the free blacks who were then, shall we say, shafted by the men. But I don't think it was deliberate. I don't think the original use of the language was deliberate. I think it was just the men didn't think about, it was so outre to them, so impossible as far as they were... It was not something they even thought about that women might claim the right to vote. I'm convinced of it.

[laughter]

**[0:44:49.3] Julie Silverbrook:** I think we're going to come back to the New Jersey debate because my suspicion is there are some people here from New Jersey, our neighbors, [laughter] and so they might be interested in that. But I want to come back to the backlash piece, Mary Beth, and talk a little bit about the ways in which women's political participation was caricatured in the press and described. And we've talked about this sort of the masculinization of women's political roles and that being used as a disincentive for women to continue participating.

**[0:45:23.4] Mary Beth Norton:** Oh, absolutely. I mean, one of the things that I realized in research was that there was immense cultural emphasis and influence placed on these British writings called *The Spectator* by Addison and Steele. And Addison, in particular hated the idea of women being involved in politics. And I find it fascinating that somebody like Benjamin Franklin famously learned how to write essays by copying Addison and Steele. Well, Addison basically said that if women became involved in politics, they would lose their beauty. There's this wonderful line where he says something like, I never knew a woman who was involved in politics who retained her beauty for more than a year. And so I thought to myself, when I read that, ah, day 366, or 367, she suddenly became ugly. But that was the point of this argument. And that was... Had immense cultural influence in the colonies as well as in England. The idea that a woman who became involved in politics would become masculine in visage and in manner and so forth. And Rosie already talked about that a little bit. And there is a famous cartoon that shows women in 1774 signing, in North Carolina, signing a statement in support of the colonial government, that is the resistance to the British. And they are shown as grotesque and shown as neglecting their children, who are sort of playing under the table. And there is a sign that the British cartoonists always used to say that there was something awful going on and it was a dog urinating on the floor in the side. And that was always a symbol in British cartoons of the time of how terrible the situation was. And in this case, it was women engaging in political activity.

**[0:47:30.4] Julie Silverbrook:** I do want to turn to some audience questions, and I like this one, which is, what words of wisdom can you share for women today? And I'm going to paraphrase this a little bit because they're interested on how we can stand on the shoulders of these giants, these women of the Revolutionary era, who had an impact when women's spheres were much smaller than they are today.

**[0:48:04.4] Mary Beth Norton:** You want to deal with that?

[laughter]

**[0:48:08.7] Rosemarie Zagarri:** I guess I can't really grapple with the whole question, but I just think it's important to understand that ideas have consequences. And that ideas like equality and rights, that was understood by people at the time, including women, including enslaved people, and applied to themselves, and they began to act on it. But I think it's also important to understand that

what we would consider progress, the growing participation of women, the enfranchisement of women, the equality of women as we define it today, doesn't necessarily proceed in a straight line, and that there are a lot of backlashes, there are a lot of regressions, and that we have to hold fast to those ideals and keep fighting for them because otherwise they will go away. But I think that it's not unheard of for things not to always proceed in a linear fashion. But these women provide good examples of persistence and endurance and strength, so...

**[0:49:21.9] Mary Beth Norton:** Yeah, I think that's absolutely right. And I do think that women today can take courage from the women in the past. I mean, I think of the women at Seneca Falls in 1848 who deliberately wrote a Declaration of Sentiments that copied the Declaration of Independence, and almost, with much of it, word... almost word for word, some of it. And then instead of talking about the horrible things that King George had done, they talked about the horrible things that men did. And I think that channeling situations like that and moving it to today and thinking about the kinds of situations that women today find themselves in and knowing how to confront issues, confront discrimination, is really important. And we did... we have four mothers who did that. And it's important to me to live up to what they did.

**[0:50:28.9] Julie Silverbrook:** We have a question here about whether there were differences for the range of women's political activities based on their religion. So were Quakers different than Puritans, were Methodists different than the small group of Catholics that was in the colonies at the time?

**[0:50:52.6] Mary Beth Norton:** Well, the most important difference is that Quakers were officially pacifists. That did not mean that all Quakers in fact were pacifists, because some became involved on one or the other side of the Revolution. But the Quaker meetings basically told their members to stay out of the war. And so women who took political positions, who were Quakers, regardless of what side they took, were fighting against the norm of the Quakers. Now, there are not a lot of Catholics around. I've never seen any studies specifically about Catholics in the Revolution and about women. But a lot of the Methodists in the colonies were in the south at that time. And the Methodists tended... the people in the South, they were back country people and they tended to be, if not loyalists, at least they were skeptics of the Revolution in a lot of ways because the Revolution was being led by the grandees along the coast. And the people in the back country had always had questions and quarrels with the people who were running the colony and the people running the colony were also running the Revolution. And so I would not be the least bit surprised to see a lot of resistance, in fact, to the Revolutionary leaders in the back country among those Methodists who were converted in the early days of Methodism, which is in the 1760s.

**[0:52:25.9] Rosemarie Zagari:** Could I just add something here? I think even more than religion, I think that the presence of the British army in your vicinity had a huge impact on not just women's allegiances and behaviors, but on men's, too. But we do know, for example, that when the British occupied Boston before the American Revolution, there was a lot of relationships and even intermarriages between the British troops and the Bostonians. We know that when the British troops went to Philadelphia and occupied Philadelphia, that there were, again, a lot of individuals, women, who sought to be courted by these British officers or soldiers or to profit from their relationship with them. So, you know, I think there are a lot of factors that determine people's allegiances. But we also know that, you know, when Charleston came under siege later on in the war, the women were in the city of Charleston, and they were fighting right alongside the men, helping to keep Charleston from being defeated for almost a month at great personal cost and sacrifice. So, you know, there's a lot of factors that determined people's allegiances. And remember, people weren't always ideologically consistent. You might be tepid about the Revolution in 1775 or 1776. You might be very negative in 1778, and then by 1783, oh, well, maybe it's not such a bad idea. And that's the way people are. And we have to remember that these were people, and they changed their

minds sometimes. So religion alone, class alone, was not necessarily the single or only predictor of their allegiance.

**[0:54:31.1] Mary Beth Norton:** Yeah, I think that's a very good point, because people did change their minds, and there were people who switched sides back and forth. And this was particularly true in the South. And I discovered this when I was working on Loyalists, because there were people who went into exile as Loyalists in Britain, but then had originally been Revolutionaries. And when they asked the British government for compensation as a Loyalist, they had trouble because other, their neighbors came in and said, well, this guy was on the other side originally, and he changed his mind. And he changed his... he's the leopard who changed his spots, as it were. And so some of those people did not get any kind of compensation for what... for property losses they had suffered when they changed from supporting the Revolution to supporting the British. So, people... it's not as though people said in 1775, yes, I'm a Revolutionary, or yes, I'm a Loyalist, and always changed that because there were a lot of people in the middle who moved back and forth. And just like today, there's a lot of people who change their minds. It's not as though you're consistently in one side or the other.

**[0:55:41.2] Julie Silverbrook:** That'll be our next panel, 250 years of flip flopping.

[laughter]

**[0:55:44.8] Mary Beth Norton:** Yeah, that's it.

**[0:55:44.9] Julie Silverbrook:** Well, thank you both for a really wonderful and rich conversation. I hope as all of us mark the 250th of the country, we take a look at the various people who played a role to understand the complexity of our founding. Please join me in thanking Mary Beth and Rosie.

[applause]

[music]

**[0:56:10.7] Julie Silverbrook:** This program was streamed live from Philadelphia on March 23rd, 2026, as a part of the NCC's America's Town Hall Series. This episode was produced and mixed by Bill Pollock. It was recorded by David Stotz and Greg Scheckler, with production support from Charles Sahm and Scott Bomboy. Research was provided by Anna Salvatore, Trey Sullivan, and Tristan Worsham. Please recommend We The People to friends, colleagues, or anyone anywhere who's eager for a weekly dose of constitutional education and debate. And as always, remember that the National Constitution Center is a private, nonpartisan nonprofit, and we rely on your generosity, passion, and engagement for all of our programming, including this podcast. Please consider donating today at [constitutioncenter.org/donate](https://constitutioncenter.org/donate). On behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Julie Silverbrook.