

WRITING WOMEN'S LIVES

American Women's History through
Letters and Diaries

Edited by

Marsha Markman, Jonathan Boe, and Susan Corey



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AMERICAN WOMEN'S HISTORY THROUGH LETTERS AND DIARIES

Edited by

**Susan Corey,
Jonathan Boe,
Marsha Markman**

California Lutheran University

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Preface

The recent scholarly awakening to the place of women in American social history can profit greatly from an overlooked body of literature: diaries and letters by women themselves. The intimacy of such materials reveals attitudes, feelings, and perspectives that would seldom find expression in more public documents. Included here are entries from early colonial settlement through recent times; plantation owners and slaves; native Americans; indentured servants; women in the military and on the homefront; immigrants and westward migrants; and women on the frontier of equal rights. The reader can return with each writer to some moment that reveals ways in which women helped to shape American society.

Editorial Comments

We have endeavored to remain faithful to each of the diaries and letters excerpted here. Aside from ellipses and marks indicating omitted entries, major textual changes are noted in the introductory remarks to relevant selections.

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Table of Contents

Part 1: The Colonial and Revolutionary Eras, From the Beginnings to 1789	1
1 • Sarah Kemble Knight <i>A Colonial Woman's Journey, 1704–1705</i>	3
2 • Mary Stafford <i>A Letter from the New World, 1711</i>	8
3 • Elizabeth Magawley <i>A Woman Speaks Out: Letter to the Editor, 1730/31</i>	13
4 • Eliza Lucas <i>On Managing a Southern Plantation, 1740</i>	15
5 • Elizabeth Sprigs <i>The Plight of an Indentured Servant, 1756</i>	17
6 • Phillis Wheatley <i>A Plea for Equal Rights for Negroes, 1774</i>	19
7 • Abigail Adams <i>"Remember the Ladies"</i> <i>Letters on Women's Rights, 1776</i>	21
8 • Catherine Van Cort <i>The Revolutionary War:</i> <i>Letters of a Loyalist Wife, 1776–1777</i>	25
9 • Belinda <i>Petition of a Slave to the</i> <i>Massachusetts Legislature, 1782</i>	30
10 • Martha Ballard <i>A Midwife's Diary, 1787–1798</i>	33
11 • Abigail Abbot Bailey <i>The Difficulty of Leaving an</i> <i>Abusive Husband, 1788–1789</i>	38

Part 2: A Growing Nation, 1789–1861	43
12 • Eliza Southgate Bowne	
<i>Letters of a New England Teenager, 1800–1801</i>	46
13 • Mary and Henry Lee	
<i>New Ideas about Marriage, 1810–1816</i>	49
14 • Anonymous	
<i>Cherokee Women's Petition, 1817</i>	53
15 • Sarah and Angelina Grimké	
<i>Letters on Abolitionism and Women's Rights, 1837</i>	55
16 • Sarah White Smith	
<i>On the Overland Trail, 1838</i>	60
17 • Fanny Kemble	
<i>Diary from a Georgia Plantation, 1839</i>	68
18 • Elizabeth Cady Stanton	
<i>Letters on Women's Rights and</i>	
<i>Changing Gender Roles, 1840–1899</i>	72
19 • Mary Paul	
<i>Letters from the Lowell Mills and a</i>	
<i>Utopian Community, 1845–1855</i>	76
20 • Fanny Appleton Longfellow	
<i>First Childbirth with Ether, 1847</i>	82
21 • Calista Hall, William Dorsey Pender, and Emily Fitzgerald	
<i>Letters about Birth Control and Abortion, 1849–1875</i>	84
22 • Ellen Birdseye Wheaton	
<i>The Struggle Between Family Obligations and</i>	
<i>Self-Expression, 1850–1856</i>	89
23 • Ellen Lee	
<i>On Teaching School in Indiana, 1852</i>	95
24 • Emily Dickinson	
<i>The Language of Female Friendship:</i>	
<i>Letters to Susan Gilbert, 1852–1854</i>	98
25 • Lucy Stone	
<i>A Women's Rights Advocate Contemplates Marriage,</i>	
<i>1853–1855</i>	103
26 • Ellen Spencer Clawson and Ellen Pratt McGary	
<i>Mormon Women's Letters on Polygamy, 1856–1857</i>	109

Part 3: The Era of the Civil War and Reconstruction, 1861–1877	115
27 • Judith Cocks, Emily, Susan (Sukey) & Ersey, Harriet Newby, and Louisa Alexander <i>Letters from Slaves, 1795–1863</i>	117
28 • Charlotte Forten <i>The Diary of an African-American Teacher and Reformer, 1854–1862</i>	122
29 • Mary Chesnut <i>A Southern Aristocrat's Diary During the Civil War, 1861–1865</i>	129
30 • Cornelia Hancock <i>Letters of a Civil War Nurse, 1863–1865</i>	135
31 • Elizabeth Haas Canfield <i>An Officer's Wife in Indian Territory, 1867–1868</i>	142
32 • Sister Monica <i>Diary of a Journey to Arizona, 1870</i>	146
33 • Mary Abell <i>Letters of a Kansas Homesteader, 1871–1875</i>	152
Part 4: Expansion and Industrialization, 1877–1919	161
34 • Juanita Breckenridge <i>Letters of a Clergywoman, 1872–1893</i>	163
35 • Mrs. A. Beaumont, Jane E. Sobers, Mrs. H. Griswold, Alzina Rathbun, Mrs. Mary Travis, Live Pryor, Mrs. Callor, and Mrs. L.M.R. Pool <i>Letters to Susan B. Anthony on Suffrage and Equal Rights for Women, 1880</i>	168
36 • Elizabeth Fedde <i>Social Worker in Brooklyn, 1883–1888</i>	174
37 • Wilhelmine Wiebusch <i>A Young Immigrant Writes Home, 1884–1886</i>	178
38 • Alice Hamilton <i>A Reformer at the Turn of the Century, 1893–1913</i>	182
39 • Martha Farnsworth <i>The Campaign for Woman Suffrage, 1894–1914</i>	188

40 • Zitkala-Sa (Gertrude Simmons Bonnin)	
<i>The School Days of an Indian Girl, 1899(?)</i>	191
41 • Mother Jones	
<i>Letters of a Labor Organizer, 1901–1914</i>	195
42 • Mabel S. Ulrich	
<i>A Wife, Mother, and Physician, 1904–1932</i>	202
43 • Martha Farnsworth and Henrietta Szold	
<i>Women's Responses to New Technology, 1905–1916</i>	209
44 • Anonymous	
<i>"A Bintel Brief": Letters from Jewish Immigrant Women, 1907–1910</i>	213
45 • Maimie Pinzer	
<i>Letters of a Former Prostitute, 1910–1911</i>	217
46 • Alice Hamilton	
<i>Peace Activist, 1915–1919</i>	224
Part 5: Prosperity, Depression, and War, 1919–1945	229
47 • Anonymous	
<i>Letters to the Children's Bureau: Federal Aid for Women and Children, 1918–1928</i>	232
48 • Mary Ritter Beard	
<i>On Knowledge, Politics, and Women's Rights, 1921–1946</i>	236
49 • Margaret Sanger	
<i>Letters on Birth Control, 1925–1928</i>	239
50 • Martha Lavell	
<i>Diary of a College Woman, 1926–1929</i>	243
51 • M. Carey Thomas	
<i>Letters from an Early Feminist, 1932</i>	247
52 • Lorena Hickok	
<i>Letters on the Great Depression, 1934</i>	249
53 • Ann Marie Low	
<i>A Dust Bowl Diary, 1934–1937</i>	252
54 • Winifred Woodley	
<i>Diary of a Suburban Housewife, 1935–1940</i>	257

55 • Catherine Lang, Polly Crow, Hazel M. Burke, Ethel Pendelbury La Palme, Katherine McReynolds, and Edith Sokol Speert <i>Letters from the Homefront and the Battlefront, 1941–1945</i>	262
56 • Elizabeth Vaughan <i>A Woman in Captivity, 1942–1943</i>	267
57 • Sonoko Iwata <i>Detention-Camp Letters, 1942–1943</i>	273
58 • Augusta Clawson <i>Shipyard Diary of a Woman Welder, 1943</i>	280
Part 6: Modern America, 1945 to the Present	285
59 • Anonymous <i>Questioning the Domestic Ideology: Letters to Betty Friedan on The Feminine Mystique, 1963</i>	287
60 • Sharon Lane and Lynda Van Devanter <i>Letters from Vietnam, 1969</i>	291
61 • Michelle Harrison <i>A Woman Doctor Confronts the Medical System, 1970s</i>	294
62 • Bella Abzug <i>A Congressional Diary, 1971</i>	298
63 • Anne Braden <i>An Open Letter on Gender and Race in the South, 1972</i>	301
64 • Johanna Von Gottfried <i>Diary from the California Farm Workers Movement, 1973</i>	305
65 • Nan Bishop, Sarah Hamilton, and Clare Bowman <i>Divorce and Single Motherhood, 1976–1977</i>	309
66 • Toi Derricotte <i>Black in a White Neighborhood, 1977–1978</i>	320
67 • Elaine Marcus Starkman <i>The Elderly and the Sandwich Generation, 1987–1990</i>	323

68 • Marsha Carow Markman	
<i>Breast Cancer Diary, 1990</i>	329
69 • Amparo Ramirez	
<i>An Undocumented Immigrant Writes to</i> <i>Her Children, 1988–1990</i>	335

Part 1

The Colonial and Revolutionary Eras, From the Beginnings to 1789

Women were present from the founding of almost every English colony in America, and their labor was vital to the success of the new settlements. For some, the colonies offered possibilities for economic independence unknown in Europe. The fluidity of society and the relative shortage of women and of workers in general created opportunities for women to escape some of the restrictions placed on them in the Old World. This was particularly true for widows and for single women, who were unburdened by marriage laws assigning their property to their husbands, but married women too at times were able to establish themselves in business or the trades. The readings in this chapter contain several diaries of such women.

Sarah Kemble Knight, a widow, undertook an adventurous journey from Massachusetts to Connecticut to conduct family business. Eliza Lucas managed three family plantations, and Martha Ballard was a successful midwife. Most women faced more difficult circumstances. Mary Stafford's letter to her cousin describes the trials of a recently arrived immigrant family. Lowest on the social scale among white women were indentured servants, bound to their employers for up to seven years to pay for their passage to America. They could be treated very harshly, as Elizabeth Sprigs' letter to her father demonstrates. Worst of all was the condition of slave women. They were denied any semblance of legal rights and, unlike most

white indentured servants, were forced to labor in the fields along with the men.

Women were active participants in the protests leading to the Revolution, being especially prominent in organizing and supporting economic boycotts of British goods. When the war came, women whose husbands were in the army played a vital role in the war effort as managers of homes, farms, and businesses. Those who were Loyalists could also face persecution, as the diary of Catherine Van Cortlandt demonstrates.

During the early eighteenth century there had been a growing willingness among women to protest their subordinate status, including their legal and political disadvantages. Elizabeth Magawley's letter touches lightly on these issues, questioning some of the stereotypes of women's behavior. With the coming of the Revolution, the rhetoric of protest became more direct. How could a political cause that asserted "all men are created equal" continue to ignore the inequality imposed on women? Abigail Adams' letters to her husband John are examples of the impact of the Revolution on women's political consciousness. Slavery represented another glaring conflict between Revolutionary rhetoric and Revolutionary practice. The African-American poet Phillis Wheatley issued a plea for equal rights, while the slave Belinda petitioned for her freedom, citing the Revolutionary cause as a justification.

The Revolution in fact produced few tangible gains for women. There was little improvement in legal and political rights. The diary of Abigail Abbot Bailey provides a graphic example of the legal disabilities women continued to face in the new nation. While slavery gradually disappeared in the North, it was fastened ever more securely on the South. Women had, however, gained experience in activism and in formulating political ideas that would carry over into the women's rights movements of the following decades.

I

Sarah Kemble Knight

A Colonial Woman's Journey, 1704-1705

Sarah Kemble Knight was born in Boston in 1666; she married Richard Knight and had one daughter before being widowed. Her home in Boston appears to have contained a shop and also served as a boarding house that earned a modest income from several renters. The diary excerpts here describe Sarah Knight's five-month journey from Boston, Massachusetts, to New Haven, Connecticut, to conduct family business, the nature of which is unclear. Her entries reveal a woman of wit and humor who ventured into a man's world with the courage of a pioneer.

MONDAY, OCTB'r Ye SECOND, 1704.— About three o'clock afternoon, I begun my Journey from Boston to New-Haven; being about two Hundred Mile. My Kinsman, Capt. Robert Luist, waited on me as farr as Dedham, where I was to meet ye Western post.

I vissitted the Reverd. Mr. Belcher, ye Minister of ye town, and tarried there till evening, in hopes ye post would come along. But he not coming, I resolved to go to Billingses where he used to lodg, being 12 miles further. But being ignorant of the way, Madm Billings, seing no persuasions of her good spouses or hers could prevail with me to Lodg there that night, Very kindly went with me to ye Tavern, where I hoped to get my guide, And desired the Hostess to inquire of her guests whether any of them would go with mee. . . .

. . . to my no small surprise, son John arrose, and gravely demanded what I would give him to go with me? Give you, sais I, are you John? Yes, says he, for want of a Better; And behold! this John look's as old as my Host, and perhaps had bin a man in the last Century. Well, Mr. John, sais I, make your demands. Why, half a pss. of eight and a dram [*likely, a dram of alcohol*], sais John. I agreed and gave him a Dram (now) in hand to bind the bargain. . . .

. . . When we had Ridd about an how'r, wee come into a thick swamp, wch. by Reason of a great fogg, very much startled mee, it being now very Dark. But nothing dismay'd John: Hee had encountered a thousand and a

Sarah Kemble Knight: from *Colonial Captivities* by Isabel Calder. Reprinted by permission of the National Society of Colonial Dames of America at 2175 Q Street, NW, Washington, DC 20007.

thousand such Swamps, having a Universall Knowledge in the woods; and readily Answered all my inquiries wch. were not a few.

In about an how'r, or someting more, after we left the Swamp, we come to Billinges, where I was to Lodg. My Guide dismounted and very Compasantly help't me down and shewd the door, signing to me wth his hand to Go in; wch I Gladly did—But had not gone many steps into the Room, ere I was Interogated by a young Lady I understood afterwards was the Eldest daughter of the family, with these, or words to this purpose, (vis.) Law for mee—what in the world brings You here at this time a night?—I never see a woman on the Rode so Dreadfull late, in all the days of my . . . life. Who are You? Where are You going? I'me scar'd out of my witts—with much now of the same Kind. I stood aghast, Prepareing to reply, when in comes my Guide—to him Madam turn'd, Roreing out: Lawfull heart, John, is it You?—how de do! Where in the world are you going with this woman? Who is she? John made no Ansr. but sat down in the corner . . . she then turned agen to mee and fell anew into her silly questions, without asking me to sit down.

I told her shee treated me very Rudely, and I did not think it my duty to answer her unmannerly Questions. But to get ridd of them, I told her I come there to have the post's company with me to-morrow on my Journey &c. Miss star'd awhile, drew a chair, bid me sitt. . . . I paid honest John wth money and dram according to contract, and Dismist him, and pray'd Miss to shew me where I must Lodg. Shee conducted me to a parlour in a little back Lento, wch was almost fill'd wth the bedsted, wch was so high that I was forced to climb on a chair to gitt up to ye wretched bed that lay on it; on wch having Stretcht my tired Limbs, and lay'd my head on a Sad-colour'd pillow, I began to think on the transactions of ye past day.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER Ye THIRD, about 8 in the morning, I with the Post proceeded forward without observing any thing remarkable; And about two, afternoon, Arrived at the Post's second stage, where the western Post mett him and exchanged Letters. . . .

. . . About Three afternoon went on with my Third Guide, who Rode very hard; and having crossed Providence Ferry, we come to a River wch they Generally Ride thro'. But I dare not venture; so the Post got a Ladd and Cannoo to carry me to tother side, and hee rid thro' and Led my hors. The Cannoo was very small and shallow, so that when we were in she seem'd redy to take in water, which greatly terrified mee, and caused me to be very circumspect, sitting with my hands fast on each side, my eyes stedy, not daring so much as to lodg my tongue a hair's breadth more on one side of my mouth then tother, nor so much as think on Lott's wife, for a wry thought would have oversett our wherey: But was soon put out of this pain, by feeling the Cannoo on shore. . . . Rewarding my sculler, [*we*] again mounted and made the best of our way forwards.

. . . wee rode on Very deliberately . . . when we entered a Thickett of Trees and Shrubbs, and I perceived by the Hors's going, we were on the descent of a Hill, wch, as wee come neerer the bottom, 'twas totally dark wth the Trees that surrounded it. But I knew by the Going of the Hors wee

had entered the water, wch my Guide told mee was the Hazzardos River he had told me off; and hee, Riding up close to my Side, Bid me not fear—we should be over Imediatly. I now ralyed all the Courage I was mistriss of, Knowing that I must either Venture my fate of drowning, or be left like ye Children in the wood. So, as the Post bid me, I gave Reins to my Nagg; and sitting as Stedy as Just before in the Cannoo, in a few minutes got safe to the other side, which hee told mee was the Narragansett [*Indian*] country.

Here We found great difficulty in Travailing, the way being very narrow, and on each side the Trees and bushes gave us very unpleasent welcomes wth their Branches and bow's, wch wee could not avoid, it being so exceeding dark. My Guide, as before so now, putt on harder than I, wth my weary bones, could follow; so left mee and the way beehind him. . . .

. . . without a thou't of any thing but thoughts themselves, I on a suden was Rous'd . . . by the Post's sounding his horn, which assured mee hee was arrived at the Stage, where we were to Lodg; and that musick was then most musickall and agreeable to mee.

. . . I was very civilly Received, and courteously entertained, in a clean comfortable House; and the Good woman was very active in helping off my Riding clothes. . . . I then betook me to my Apartment, wch was a little Room parted from the Kitchen by a single bord partition; where, after I had noted the Occurrances of the past day, I went to bed, which tho' pretty hard, Yet neet and handsome. But I could get no sleep, because of the Clamor of some of the Town tope-ers in next Room, Who were entered into a strong debate concerning ye Signification of the name of their Country, (vis.) *Narraganset*. One said it was named so by ye Indians, because there grew a Grier there, of a prodigious Highth and bigness, the like hardly ever known, called by the Indians Narragansett; And quotes an Indian of so Barberous a name for his Author, that I could not write it. His Antagonist Replied no—It was from a Spring it had its name, wch hee well knew where it was, which was extreem cold in summer, and as Hott as could be imagined in the winter, which was much resorted too by the natives, and by them called Narragansett, (Hott and Cold,) and that was the originall of their places name—with a thousand Impertinances not worth notice, wch He utter'd with such a Roreing voice and Thundering blows with the fist of wickedness on the Table, that it peirced my very head. I heartily fretted, and wish't 'um tongue tyed. . . . I set my Candle on a Chest by the bed side, and setting up, fell to my old way of composing my Resentments, in the following manner:

*I ask thy Aid, O Potent Rum!
To Charm these wrangling Topers Dum.
Thou has their Giddy Brains possest—
And I, poor I, can get no rest.
Intoxicate them with thy fumes:
O still their Tongues till morning comes!*

And I know not but my wishes took effect; for the dispute soon ended wth 'tother Dram; and so Good night!