



EARLY AMERICAN WOMEN

A Documentary History, 1600-1900

NANCY WOLOCH

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A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY:
1600-1900

Nancy Woloch

Barnard College

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PREFACE

"Why ought the one half of mankind, to vault and lord it over the other?" asked the anonymous author of an early American tract, *The Female Advocate* (1801). Unfurling her argument for women's education, the never-identified "matron of Connecticut" bombarded her readers with rhetorical questions. "Shall woman be forever destined solely to the distaff and the needle, and never expand an idea beyond the walls of her house?" she asked. "Shall the woman be kept ignorant, to render her more docile in the management of domestic concerns? . . . May not all the seeming differences between the sexes, be imputed solely to the difference of their education and subsequent advantage? . . . Is not a woman of capacious will and well stored mind a better wife, a better widow, a better mother, and a better neighbor; and shall I add, a better friend in every respect?"

The egalitarian convictions that impelled the "female advocate" have similarly infused the exploration of women's history. Since the 1960s, collective effort has produced an expansive field of inquiry. Historians of women have excavated a lost world of female experience, revealed the distinctive nature of that experience, created new chronologies to suit it, and offered interpretations to explain it. Like the embattled *Female Advocate*, women's history has also been committed to an agenda for change. A major target of such change, of course, is the discipline of history itself, where women's history has had a major impact: It has enlarged the terrain with which all historians must cope. But the relationship between this particular field and the rest of the discipline is now a two-way street. In many current studies, historians of women take pains to draw connections between aspects of women's experience and what might be called the larger picture. "The best women's history does not study women's lives in isolation," historian Louise Tilly observes in a recent article. "It endeavors to relate those lives to other historical themes, such as the power of ideas or the forces of structural change. In this way women's history has already changed our view of what matters in history."*

*Louise Tilly, "Gender, Women's History, and Social History," *Social Science History* 13 (Winter 1989), p. 447.

This collection of documents seeks to capitalize on the insights of recent work in women's history and to consider connections between women's lives and "other historical themes." The documents that follow by no means constitute a comprehensive history of early American women. Rather, they focus on a series of discrete topics that figure prominently in this history. Within the topical limits imposed, I have sought to cover a diversity of women's experiences and to suggest the impact of class, race, and region. I have also sought to present a variety of voices: women who reveal their own lives, women who describe the lives of other women, and men who record or discuss some facet of women's experience or perhaps try to impart some piece of advice. Above all, I have sought to include a diversity of sources. Many of the documents in this book fall into the category of the private and informal: diaries, journals, correspondence, and personal narratives. Most of this material was never intended for public consumption but rather directed at a limited audience of friends or family members or perhaps not meant to be read by others at all. Other documents, aimed at a wider readership, fall into a more public category. These include tracts, speeches, declarations, circulating letters, institutional records, travelers' accounts, advice manuals, professional studies, newspaper and magazine articles, and other publications. A third type of documents comes from the public record, such as laws, wills, probate records, court records, and government reports. Through this variety of sources, I have tried to touch on the experience of both ordinary and exceptional women.

Each of the three major sections in this book covers a broad time span. Part One, on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, concerns primarily the encounter between Native Americans and colonizers and the movement of English traditions and institutions from the old world to the new. Part Two, on the early nineteenth century, 1800–1860, involves some of the major developments—geographic expansion, economic change, class formation, voluntary association—with which women were involved. Part Three, on the years 1860–1900, focuses on women's participation in public events—notably the Civil War and the process of emancipation—and their movement into public life. Each chronological section comprises a group of topical chapters. Introductions to each chapter attempt to anchor the documents that follow in time and place and to present some relevant questions with which historians have been concerned. Headnotes to each document offer details about its author or origins, the circumstances under which it was written, and the audience for whom it was intended.

The use of documents has obvious advantages. At their best, primary sources are alive, direct, immediate, and vivid. They exude authenticity. These same documents, however, can be as laden with bias as interpretive narrative. Each document had its origins in a bygone time and should be regarded as a prism through which the values and concerns (often unfamiliar) of a particular era (often distant) are refracted. The anonymous "female advocate" of 1801, for instance, attuned to a distinctive climate of revolutionary-era ideas, sought not merely to assert "women's rights" but also to redress "women's wrongs" and above all to renegotiate the contemporary rules of the game under which women and men interacted.

Any given document, also, is likely to convey a specific writer's idiosyncratic or partisan slant on the subject in question. It may well be a vehicle through which narrowly personal views—or exceptionally prescient ones—are voiced. I am partial, for instance, to several of the documents that seem to anticipate, however inadvertently, the concerns of contemporary social historians as well as to those documents offered by renegotiators such as the matron of Connecticut.

Finally, the selection of documents in this book is of necessity loaded. Despite all previous disclaimers, it is weighted in favor of the literate. In the colonial era, approximately the first two centuries represented here, the vast majority of women lacked writing skills (more about this soon). Thereafter, female literacy made great strides. Still, throughout the nineteenth century, only a minority of people expressed themselves with ease through the written word. To depend heavily on women's voices, therefore, entails heavy (though not exclusive) reliance on a minority of women, usually those with at least some degree of education, who habitually conveyed their thoughts in writing. One last point: the documents offered here focus primarily on the cutting edge—on women who were involved in some new development or aspect of change. These caveats aside, I hope that I have presented important themes and suggested "what matters in history."

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Nancy Woloch

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NANCY WOLOCH is the author of *Women and the American Experience* (2nd ed., 1994), *Women and the American Experience: A Concise History* (1996), and *Muller v. Oregon: A Brief History with Documents* (1996). She is the coauthor of *The American Century: A History of the United States since the 1890s* (4th ed., 1992), with Walter LaFeber and Richard Polenberg, and of *The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People* (3rd. ed., 1996). She teaches History and American Studies at Barnard College, Columbia University.

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PART ONE

A New World:

The 17th and 18th Centuries

When Anne Bradstreet, a young Puritan wife, arrived in Boston harbor in 1630, she found “a new world and new manners, at which my heart rose [rebelled]. But after I was convinced that it was the will of God, I submitted to it.” Few women in colonial America could record their response to emigration or any other experience, because only a minority could read or write. Studies of colonial literacy—usually measured by whether individuals could sign legal deeds or, alternatively, make “marks”—suggest that female literacy lagged behind that of men. Toward the end of the colonial era, in 1760, for instance, less than half of the women in Massachusetts, the most highly literate colony, could sign their names on wills, compared to some eighty percent of the men. Although many women who were unable to sign could probably read, historians estimate, female literacy was far from universal. Studies of female signing in other colonies suggest that well over half of white women lacked literacy, compared to smaller proportions of men. Among Indian and slave women, presumably few or none had the skills to leave written records.

The search for documentary evidence of colonial women’s experience is therefore an imposing task. To present women’s voices, it is tempting to rely on the output of the literate elite—those women who left letters and diaries, and occasionally (if rarely) publications. The women who produced such written records were usually Anglo-American women of some education and social status, and often related to important men. They were therefore singular and unrepresentative. To obtain information about ordinary women’s lives, historians have had to delve into a far broader range of data than women alone were able to provide. Some information comes from the writings of men—from their letters, diaries, sermons, essays, and published observations. Some comes from the colonial press, with its wealth of announcements, advertisements, and

local news. Some comes from the colonial churches and their ministers, who may have recorded the activities of parishioners, especially their religious conversions, concerns, and disputes. And a vast amount of information about women's lives comes from the public records that colonists kept—from, for instance, county court proceedings, testimony in trials, marriage and separation agreements, indenture and apprenticeship contracts, and records of probate courts, which contain wills and household inventories.

Such documents, while offering far more than the experience of the literate elite, do not necessarily present a complete or accurate picture of colonial life, or of women's lives. Wills, for example, a favorite resource of historians, are a biased type of document. The vast majority of wills were left by men, whose view of family relationships they reflect. They also were left primarily by men with property to distribute. In the late colonial era, some two-thirds of men died without having written wills.

Other kinds of public records may harbor bias, too. At county court proceedings, for instance, a particular type of woman—the young, single, indentured servant, arrested for such crimes as theft or bastardy—was overrepresented. Documents concerning marriages also may convey misleading impressions. Separation agreements or decisions do not reflect the way that the majority of colonial marriages disintegrated, through the desertion of men. Few

Engraving of *Washington's Reception on the Bridge at Trenton*, on the way to his inauguration in 1789.

(Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.)



documents, moreover, present the experience of nonwhite women, which has been pieced together through information provided by such disparate sources as travelers' accounts and county censuses. Still, historians have used their ingenuity to mine the records that exist, whatever their liabilities, and to recreate the physical and social world of colonial women.

