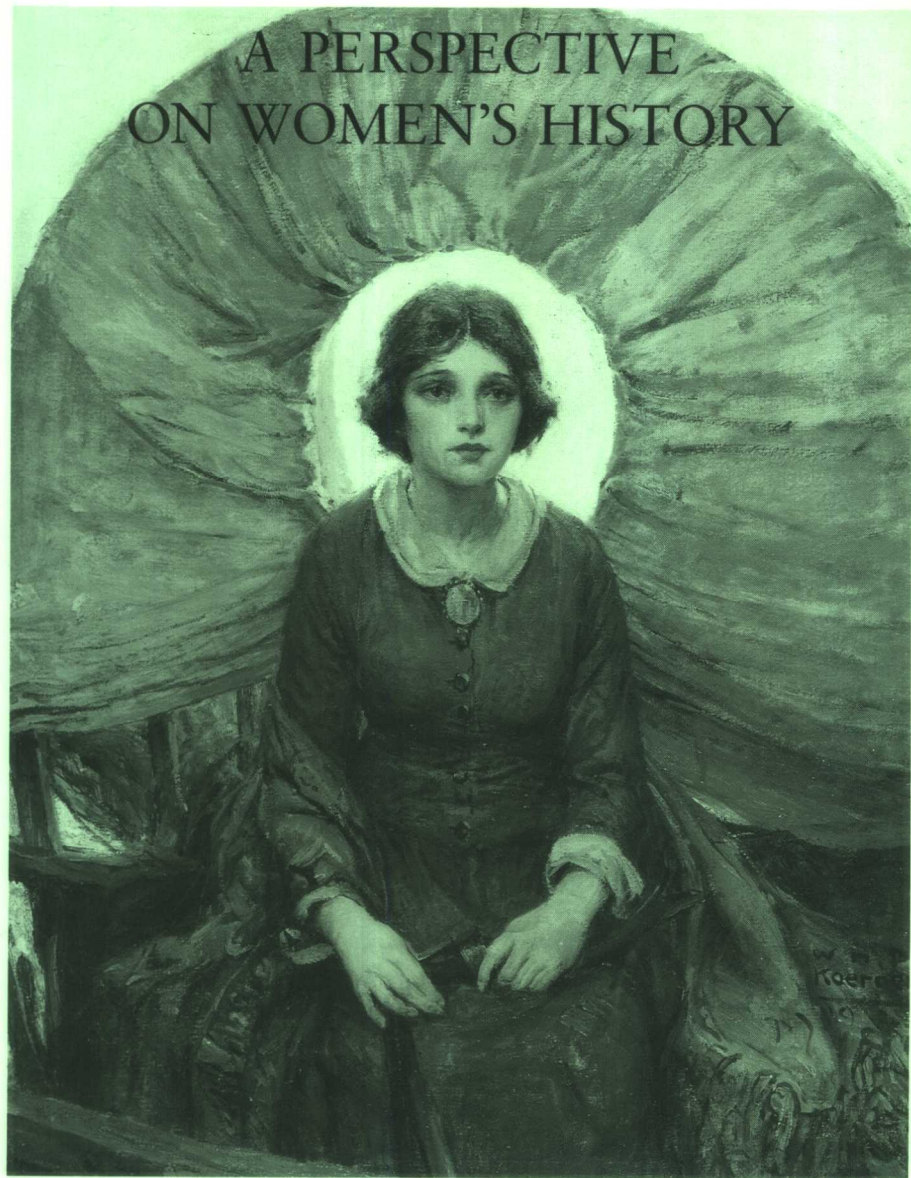


# *Inventing the American Woman*

A PERSPECTIVE  
ON WOMEN'S HISTORY



GLEND A RILEY

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A PERSPECTIVE  
ON WOMEN'S HISTORY

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*Inventing the American Woman*



*This 1831 illustration entitled The Wife shows a woman who is expected to do little to occupy herself except sit idly, resting and fanning, as her husband intently reads. From Godey's Lady's Book, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.*



## *Prescription and Protest*

**Y**OU may be asking yourself why you have not encountered a number of texts on women's history during your high school and college careers. You may be wondering why the story of American women has seemed to come to light only so recently. Actually, interest in the history of women is not a recent development. Americans of many eras have considered women's experiences worthy of record.

In the early 1830s, for example, *Godey's Lady's Book*, the largest selling periodical of its day, offered its readers historical sketches of women as a regular feature. An early book-length study analyzing women in the American past appeared in 1848. Elizabeth Fries Lummis Ellet, a well-known author, published a two-volume work entitled *The Women of the American Revolution*, which used oral history to recount the contributions of women to the Revolutionary War. In 1854, writer Lydia Maria Child also wrote a two-volume history of women. Entitled *History of the Condition of Women*, it spanned ancient to modern times. In 1898, yet another two-volume work, Sydney Fisher's *Men, Women, and Manners in Colonial Times*, stressed the contributions of women to American agriculture. Many other similar books and articles written by both women and men appeared throughout the nineteenth century.

By the turn of the twentieth century, many historians who had received formal training in the new American graduate schools began to join these lay historians in recording and analyzing the course of historical events. Because they usually concentrated on political and economic events such as wars, depressions, acts of Congress, and presidential policies, groups of people such as women, blacks, American Indians, immigrants, and "common" men were generally overlooked. A group of reform-minded historians known as Progressives, however, soon began to attack this view of history. During the 1920s, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., in particular, raised serious questions about the virtual absence of women in most

history textbooks. He called upon historians to expand their outlook to include females as well as males.

Although Schlesinger's words often fell on deaf ears, several historians took his challenge seriously. In 1938, Julia Cherry Spruill wrote a detailed survey of women's lives and labors in the southern colonies. In 1946, Mary Ritter Beard published *Women as Force in History* to demonstrate that women indeed deserved inclusion in the historical record. Beard's thoughtful and well-reasoned study presented an important argument for increased recognition of women's history. A few others followed Beard's lead. During the next few decades, some fine women's history was written yet did not receive widespread attention.

The emergence of the contemporary feminist movement in the 1960s dramatically revised this situation. No longer willing to accept historical "invisibility," feminist leaders called for exposure of women's historical heritage. They demanded that women's lives and experiences receive attention from all types of scholars, and especially from historians. No longer, they warned, would women tolerate being denied a sense of value and identity by near omission from the historical record.

Possessing an increased social consciousness as a result of the various reform crusades of the 1960s, many historians responded enthusiastically to the call to retrieve women's history. They undertook a sincere attempt to remedy the omissions, usually by adding unusual or important women to historical studies and textbooks. But change was slow and difficult to effect. In 1976, I conducted a survey of American history textbooks that revealed a discouraging picture. In a textbook written in 1972, one that offered a 409-page survey of the "complicated story" of "our national history" before 1877, only 5 women appeared as opposed to 278 men. Four of these women were covered in the only three paragraphs on women's history in the entire text. A 478-page work published in 1975 included 13 women and 406 men. Out of almost ninety illustrations, only four pictured women. Here, the topic of women's history was dealt with in less than four pages. These were typical of the large number of American history textbooks examined.

In addition, these volumes concentrated on famous women and those who participated in the woman suffrage movement. Black, American Indian, Mexican-American, and other racial and ethnic groups of women were seldom mentioned. Working, frontier, southern, and other types of women were similarly ignored. Most historians still used the pronouns "he," "him," and "his" as generic terms that subsumed women. And they continued to refer to women condescendingly as "the gentler sex" while characterizing suffragists with such phrases as "petticoats in revolt" and "a belligerent bevy of female agitators."

Despite these problems, both historians and the public began to realize that women had been given short shrift in history. More encouraging yet

was the willingness of many historians to try to correct the situation. A new breed of historians, women's historians, began to emerge in the late 1960s and early 1970s to aid in the development of this "remedial history," as it soon came to be known. At first they concentrated on correcting the traditional omission of women, primarily by writing famous women into historical accounts. They quickly turned their attention to more sophisticated analysis. Both female and male historians of women began to explore questions relating to the oppression of women, their political activities, involvements with home and family, participation in reform movements, and changing roles in different eras. At the same time, they began to call for an integration of women's history into all history courses. They often naively believed that, once they had established the validity of women's history and integrated it into historical knowledge as a whole, their task would be finished.

As the study of women's history progressed and grew throughout the 1970s and 1980s, its complexity and vast scope became increasingly apparent. It also became obvious that women's history could not be dealt with simply by establishing a "compensatory" history that would interject women's contributions into a male-oriented past. The story of women's lives through time was so intricate that it clearly demanded ongoing study by many scholars who would be willing to devote entire careers to its pursuit. Consequently, women's history and the larger field of women's studies became well-established areas of research, study, and instruction. Many specialized journals, such as *Women's Studies*, *Signs*, and *Women's History*, now exist. The American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians recognize women's "conference groups" within their organizations, important steps in legitimizing the field of women's history. Since 1973, six Berkshire Conferences on the history of women have been held. Numerous other conferences and scholarly sessions are now held every year. And thousands of women's history and women's studies courses and programs are now offered in American schools, colleges, and universities. Still, experts agree that the surface of the study of women has just been scratched.

Despite this trend toward specialization, historians interested in women are still dedicated to integrating knowledge about them into other history courses. A movement often called "mainstreaming" is currently afoot to encourage instructors and students alike to focus on the history of their collective past rather than on only segments of it. Like the early feminists, proponents of mainstreaming argue that women should not be denied their historical heritage. But they also add that inadequate coverage of women is unfair to men as well because it produces a biased view of the past. Reaching these women and men with a more balanced version of history requires efforts that range beyond specialized courses. Advocates of mainstreaming firmly believe that it is the

function of the introductory history course to present students with a comprehensive and inclusive approach to the past.

This book, *Inventing the American Woman*, presents an introduction to the history of women in the United States that combines factual knowledge with a specific thesis intended to provoke discussion and further thought. It is my hope that it will inform, enlighten, and expand the thinking of all who read it.

In an attempt to achieve these goals, this book necessarily emphasizes what historian Kathryn Kish Sklar terms "gender specific" experiences. It focuses on those historical episodes that are more germane to one gender than the other. Specifically, women's work, socialization, roles, activities, and cultural values are of primary concern. Due to limitations of time and space, "human specific" occurrences, or those that involve both men and women, often receive little attention. As Sklar argues, it is often necessary to divide and reduce complicated reality in order to analyze its various components. In this case, women's history is separated from human history to make it manageable and understandable.

More specifically, this volume compares the model that was to direct American women's behavior with women's reactions to it. The model was created by generations of both women and men who accepted certain enduring "truths" regarding women. To them a real American woman intrinsically was, among other things, a devoted mother, an unusually virtuous person who had to remain aloof from the corruption of politics, a domestic individual who labored most happily and productively within her own home, and a weak-minded, physically inferior being who needed guidance from stronger and wiser people—men. Once accepted as truths, these ideas were embodied in a series of intricate images and stereotypes that defined and limited women's roles. In other words, people invented the American woman.

All cultures invent roles to achieve certain objectives. A variety of scholars and commentators have offered their ideas concerning the purpose served by the model American woman. Some argue that a narrow, domestic image was the creation of selfish men who conspired to keep power and privilege for themselves. Others suggest that a limited sphere for women assured the continuing consolidation of political power in the hands of an elite, prevented disquieting shifts in the nation's labor force, and forestalled anxiety-producing changes in such areas as the family, education, and social life. Yet others point out that confining women to certain activities was a logical outcome of most earlier periods of world history in which men were usually dominant.

It is not the purpose of this book to endorse any of these views. It does argue that the model was confining, tension-producing, and, at most times, outmoded, despite the fact that generations of American women

and men clung tenaciously to it. These people apparently found stereotypes of women helpful or comforting. Perhaps the idealization of women seemed to ensure the continuation of a customary and thus comfortable way of life. In other words, the idea of women's separate sphere was familiar and known, like an old shoe. Never mind that the shoe's broken last and outmoded heel prevented it from functioning properly. A new shoe might create new, unknown problems.

As a result of this kind of thinking, untold numbers of women were compelled to accept the dictates of the invented image and attempted to fulfill its many precepts. If they had misgivings, questions, or doubts as they strove to develop their domesticity and accept their imputed weaknesses, many managed to keep them to themselves. Perhaps at such times they even convinced themselves that they were in grievous error to question societal prescriptions regarding their feminine nature.

Yet in addition to thousands of such seemingly quiet and accepting women, there were thousands throughout America's history who resisted the model. They openly exhibited and fervently discussed the tensions that they felt. Their feelings of conflict resulted from trying to function as unique individuals while fitting themselves, however tortuously, into prescribed patterns. Although these women had distinct hopes, desires, and talents, they found it necessary to adapt their lives to the stereotypes. They accepted the idea that they had to emulate the model in order to be "true" American women. Thus, they valiantly grappled with a demand that they live up to stereotypes rather than develop their own talents and desires.

These women were often displeased that molds had been cast for them rather than opportunities offered. Societal expectations determined almost every aspect of their lives and directed most of their actions. These prescriptions caused women's education to be distinct, segregated, and of inferior quality. They forced women's literature to be narrow, often puerile, and limiting to the mind. And they encouraged women's clothing to be impractical, sexually enhancing, and limiting to the body.

The many women who disliked having to cope with such restrictions on their lives seemed to have split personalities. They continually tried both to achieve the prescribed image and to develop their own personalities. It is on this type of woman that this book concentrates. It maintains that their experience represents the lives of American women to a far greater degree than does that of the docile and supposedly happy women who, at least on the surface, shaped themselves into a facsimile of the accepted model. The primary object here is to examine from a historical perspective the lives and activities of women who lived uneasily with the invented American woman. Black, American Indian, and Oriental women, for whom the model American woman was a meaningless

construct, are also considered. This book deals, as all women's history must, with both the image of the ways women should act and with the manner in which women actually did think and feel. Rather than accepting conventional and largely unfounded descriptions of women's lives, it refers to women's own words and actions as well as to recent analyses by women's history scholars.

The book proceeds through the major eras of early American history by determining the prescriptions for women and examining women's protests against them. It begins with the traditional date of 1607, the year of the first successful English settlement at Jamestown, and concludes in our own era of the 1980s. The first centuries witnessed the painful growth, progress, and unification of the American nation. For women, they also brought change, development, and a growing awareness of the benefits of solidarity. During the last century, the United States underwent gigantic changes, including industrialization, urbanization, and development as a world power. For women, the image of the model American woman was restructured but not destroyed by crucial developments including their mass entry into the labor force, the granting of woman suffrage, and the emergence of the contemporary feminist movement.

The suggested readings at the end of each chapter are designed to lead the interested reader into further study of women's issues and themes for particular periods. It is hoped that the information offered here will lend insight into the reshaping of the model of American women from simply that of "Adam's rib," restricted to a "separate sphere," to a more dynamic and attractive image of a full participant in all aspects of the modern world.

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Matoaks al's Rebecka daughter to the mighty Prince Powhatan Emperour of Attanoughkomouck al's Virginia converted and baptized in the Christian faith, and Wife to the wor.<sup>th</sup> M<sup>r</sup> Tho: Rolfe.

*This portrait of Pocahontas was painted by an unknown English artist after the 1616 engraving of her by Simon van de Passe. It presents her as a Euro-American woman in appearance and dress rather than as an American Indian. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.*



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## *A Golden Age? Colonial America* 1607–1776

**T**HE year was 1607. The English, eager to enter the race for colonies in the new world, had already failed in their attempt to settle the island of Roanoke off the coast of North Carolina. Now they sent a shipload of men to settle in Virginia. Hopeful that they would find rich natural resources similar to those discovered by Spanish colonizers in South America and French colonizers in Canada, these Englishmen looked toward the new land with optimism in their hearts.

Their hopes were soon shattered. After almost destroying themselves in their futile attempts to discover precious metals and other riches, these first English colonists at Jamestown turned to agriculture. They began to grow crops to feed themselves and then tobacco to export to England. It was soon apparent to both them and the mother country that colonization in Virginia would succeed only if it were based on long-term settlement by families that could provide a market for English goods.

This policy depended on the presence of women—a critical factor in English colonization. Not only were their childbearing abilities essential to the success of colonies in North America, but their contributions as laborers, religious and social forces, and wives and mothers were also crucial. Despite the importance of women to the development of early America, however, traditional conceptions of women, transplanted from Europe and surviving the demands of the colonial environment, continued to shape women's lives. Yet the raw new world and the resistance of numerous female colonists modified customary ideas of women's roles and behaviors.

There is evidence that a few women entered the colonial scene in North America very early. Records indicate that a woman named Anne Forest and her maid, Anne Buras, arrived in Virginia in 1608. A few other women probably completed the hazardous journey as well. But the