

## IN THE WORDS OF WOMEN

*The Revolutionary War and  
the Birth of the Nation,  
1765-1799*

Louise V. North,  
Janet M. Wedge,  
and Landa M. Freeman

Foreword by Car

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# In the Words of Women

Sept.  
Town with some pretty Stone and brick  
~~houses~~ Buildings in it. After passing  
the Town we met the falling spring  
again, one of the finest springs in this  
part of the world by which several  
Mills in this neighborhood are turned  
Obliged to stop sooner than usual  
one of our horses being lame, find the  
people a good deal shy, at first, but  
after a little while very sociable and  
Obliging, treated with some very  
fine Apples which begin to grow  
very scarce with us, I am much  
Apeared we shall be like the Chil-  
ren of Israel long for the Garlick  
and Onions that your city Abounds  
with.

¶ Set off for the north mountain  
which we find so bad we are Obliged  
to foot it up, and could compare  
ourselves to nothing but a parcel  
of goats climbing up some of the

Figure 1. Page, Mrs. Mary Dewees's journal from Philadelphia to Kentucky.  
Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.



Figure 2. *Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston* (1773).  
Library of Congress, Digital ID: ppmsca 02947.

## Foreword

Like Alice in her adventures through the looking glass, historians of women in the American Revolution have come to realize the truth of the White Knight's warning: you have to run twice as fast to stay in one place. It was not always so. In the early decades of the 19th century, women like Elizabeth Ellet could fill two volumes with accounts of female patriots and their deeds during the nation's struggle for independence. But by the end of the century, the professionalization of History, insured by the creation of PhD programs in the field, led to a gender amnesia: grand and sweeping accounts of the nation's rise to prosperity and influence, reconstructions of military campaigns and political rivalries, along with biographies of Presidents and captains of industry, left little room for the role of women in creating and sustaining the nation. Their stories found refuge in the archives of groups like the Daughters of the American Revolution, and in the pages of local studies that carried the stigma of "antiquarian" or "amateur" history. Women's letters and diaries sat unread in attics and in archives where they were catalogued as "miscellaneous documents" or, in some cases, simply identified as a famous man's "other papers." In textbooks, individual women bobbed on the ocean of male achievements and then sank below the waters. All that was left were names—Virginia Dare, Pocahontas, Abigail Adams, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Eleanor Roosevelt—and the vague sense that something they had done or been had briefly lifted them out of the sea of anonymous women.

But in the 1960s, as Joseph Heller might say, something happened. Graduate history programs opened their doors to a new, heterogeneous collection of future scholars: white women, African Americans, sons and daughters of immigrant groups, bright and eager talents from modest family backgrounds rather than privileged enclaves. Looking into the mirror of American history, these young men and women could not find themselves—and many of them set out to find the missing figures and the silenced voices. Among the most determined were women historians studying the 18th century.

Entering the archives with steely determination, these historians leafed through the miscellaneous files, scoured the papers of famous men to discover the papers of forgotten wives and daughters, poured over court records and wills, sermons and etiquette books, newspaper essays, military order books, applications for compensation made to the British and the American governments—and produced a revolutionary reinterpretation of the American Revolu-

tion. The cast of characters was no longer exclusively male; the landscape of protest, war, and peace had been transformed.

Yet, if women have been written into the story of our nation's founding, our task is far from done. For the voices of the women of the revolutionary generation have sometimes been lost in the rush to provide analysis and narration of their roles. The story is too often told *about* the women who protested, boycotted, fought, nursed, spied and took over the task of running farm and shop, but the voices we hear do not come from the women themselves. We know what women did, but we are not steeped in how women perceived what they had done. Without these 18th century voices, our history is incomplete. As editions of the correspondence of men like Washington, Franklin, Hamilton, Jay, and Jefferson are joined on the bookshelves by the memoirs and diaries of ordinary soldiers, planters and merchants, the voices of women grow faint, filtered—in danger of being lost.

The challenge is to bring those voices to the written page, to make us as familiar with the cadences of the housewife and the camp follower as we are with the tempo of Patrick Henry's oratory. And above all, we must hear what these women felt and observed and how they made their choices and faced the consequences of their actions in their own words.

This is the challenge that the editors of *In the Words of Women: The Revolutionary War and the Birth of the Nation, 1765-1799* have met. This collection promises to help free us from the need to run faster to stay in one place; it offers us the possibility of winning our race to produce a richer, more complex history of the era of American independence.

Carol Berkin  
New York 2009



## Acknowledgments

Our adventure of discovery, which began with the correspondence of Founding Father John Jay and his wife Sarah Livingston Jay, led us to continue our research in their time period but in pursuit of the writings of women. This too has been exhilarating and fascinating. Our journey would have been much more onerous had it not been for the generous encouragement of many people. We were the fortunate recipients of the enthusiasm and friendship of Carol Berkin, Presidential Professor of History at City University of New York, and of David Gellman, Professor of History at DePauw University, who gave us welcome suggestions and support. Our deep gratitude also goes to Elizabeth Nuxoll, Editor of the Jay Papers, and to William Pencak, Professor of American History at Pennsylvania State University.

Information retrieval by electronic means has expanded at an amazing rate over the six years that we have worked on this book; we have benefited from that growth, finding appropriate sources to explore in greater depth. Libraries and historical associations, however, remain the mother lode for the original writings of women. In our travels and doing the research, we are greatly indebted for the expert assistance of the staffs of:

American Antiquarian Society; American Folk Art Museum, New York City; American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio; American Philosophical Society; Boston Public Library/Rare Books; Columbia University, Rare Book & Manuscript Library; Connecticut Historical Society; Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York City; The Grolier Club, New York City; Historic Hudson Valley, Archival Collection, Tarrytown, New York; Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Honnold/Mudd Library Special Collections, Claremont, California; The Huntington Library, San Marino, California; John C. Hart Library, Shrub Oak, New York; John Jay Homestead New York State Historic Site; Knox's Headquarters New York State Historic Site; Lancaster County [Pennsylvania] Historical Society; Library of Congress; Long Island Oyster Bay [New York] Historical Society; Maine Historical Society; Massachusetts Historical Society; The Morgan Library & Museum Reading Room; Mount Vernon Estate & Gardens; Museum of the City of New York; National Archives; National Library of Scotland Manuscript Collection; New Hampshire Historical Society;

The New-York Historical Society Library Manuscript Department; New York Public Library, Manuscript and Archives Division; New York State Historical Association; New York State Library Archives; New York University, Fales Library and Special Collections; North Carolina Department of Archives and History at Raleigh; Pennsylvania County Historical Society; Pennsylvania Historical Society; Princeton University Press; Rhode Island Historical Society; Sharon [Connecticut] Historical Society; University of Missouri Press; University of South Carolina Press; University of Wisconsin Press; Wesleyan University Press; Westchester County [New York] Archives; Westchester County [New York] Historical Society; Yale University, Sterling Memorial Library.

We also thank them for permission to quote from materials we found in their collections as well as Professor Elaine F. Crane, Fordham University; John Jackson, G. S. MacManus Co., Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania; and Ellen R. Cohn, editor of the Franklin Papers. Our heartfelt acknowledgments for their stalwart enthusiasm for our project go to Tracy Potter (Massachusetts Historical Society), Ted O'Reilly (The New-York Historical Society), Michele Lee (Mount Vernon Estate & Gardens Library), Kim Reynolds (Boston Public Library/Rare Books), Jim Shea (Longfellow National Historic Site), John L. Bell, Benjamin Bromley (Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary), Jamie Kingman Rice (Maine Historical Society), Jude Pfister (Washington Headquarters, Morristown, New Jersey), Heather Tennes (Lancaster County Historical Society), Sheila Mackenzie (National Library of Scotland), Richard C. Malley (Connecticut Historical Society), Courtney Wagner (American Folk Art Museum), William Wedge, and Cathy W. Miranker.

Our appreciative thanks go to Andrew Bingham for his foray into the James Iredell Papers at the North Carolina Department of Archives and History at Raleigh; to Patrick Alexander, Pennsylvania State University Press, to Eleanor Phillips Brackbill, Director of Education at the Neuberger Museum, Purchase, New York, and to the late Heidi S. Terralavoro, who read sections of the manuscript and made insightful suggestions for its improvement. We are grateful for the professional guidance we received from Erin Walpole and Laura Grzybowski at Lexington Books.

A collective tip of our hats to Reinout E. Hunningher, Jefferson Freeman, James H. North, and Nicholas Wedge for their always welcome encouragement and suggestions, whether literary or technical. We dedicate this volume to them.

*Fatti maschi, parole femine*  
Masculine deeds, feminine words

(17th century Italian saying)

## Editorial Guidelines

Our adventures delving into archival treasure troves housed in historical societies and libraries began more than a decade ago while doing research on John Jay, his wife Sarah Livingston Jay, and their extended families. In reading their correspondence, these figures from history came to life, and we shared with them the good times, and the bad. Along the way, we encountered many other people who, we felt, also deserved to be heard—thus the genesis of this book. We had been fortunate that the bulk of the Jay research was accomplished at Columbia University’s Rare Book & Manuscript Library, but this time we had to go far afield to find original documents (see the Acknowledgments). The books by Mrs. Elizabeth Fries Ellet as well as those by modern writers gave us names of women to consider, as did suggestions from other scholars. The Internet has burgeoned as a research tool in recent years, leading us to material we might otherwise not have found. We are certain there are other voices still waiting to be discovered.

We have selected the words of women that move the narrative along, have a strong emotional impact, and will inform and enrich the reader’s knowledge of American life in the latter part of the eighteenth century. It is clear from the wealth of material uncovered that women felt a need to put their thoughts on paper, for themselves or to share with friends. As Jemima Condict, daughter of a New Jersey farmer and preacher, put it: “Sometimes after our people is gone to Bed I get my Pen for I Dont know how to Content myself without writeing Something.”<sup>1</sup> Our goal is to allow women to express their thoughts, whether on battles, smallpox outbreaks, birth or death.

While we have made every effort to include a broad spectrum of society, living in the North and the South, the majority of women are middle to upper class, and white, as they would have received some formal education. Deborah Read Rogers Franklin’s spelling may have been poorer than Sarah Livingston Jay’s, but both wrote vivid letters that are engrossing to read. Women loyal to the British crown and those who sided with the “rebels” also are heard. Native Americans and African Americans have their say, although—as their cultures relied on strong oral traditions—written documents by these women are scarcer. Martha Washington’s slave Oney Judge admitted that, though taught excellent sewing skills, she did not learn to read or write while in her owner’s household.

It is our intention to weave an integrated, interconnected narrative across class, ethnicity, locale, and age to produce a clearer picture of an extraordinary time.

Inevitably, worthy women and interesting documents had to be rejected: perhaps the materials had been published elsewhere (such as the Petition of an African Slave Belinda of 1782) or would have required too much editorial explanation to make sense in a limited space (such as the letters of Elizabeth Gates). By the same token, how could we ignore the poetry of Phillis Wheatley or the words of Abigail Smith Adams? Their contributions add significantly to our narrative.

Primary sources need to be used with caution. Some purported women's writings did not originate in the eighteenth century, such as *Theatrum Majorum. The Cambridge of 1776 . . . with which is incorporated The Diary of Dorothy Dudley* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1876), created and published for the commemoration of the Cambridge Centennial or *Personal Recollections of the American Revolution A Private Journal* by "Lydia Minturn Post," editor Sidney Barclay (Port Washington, Kennicat Press, 1859). Also excluded were Helen Evertson Smith's imagined scenarios in *Colonial Days and Ways—as Gathered from Family Papers* (1900) and the plagiarized *Letters of an American Woman Sailing for England in 1784 Quaint Message from Love Lawrence, Daughter of an American Clergyman, Who Left her Country to Marry a Loyalist whose Political Principles Were Opposed to the New Republic An Interesting Glimpse of Life* by Edith Willis Linn (*The Journal of American History*. New Haven, Connecticut, 1909, Third Number, Third Volume) which quotes, nearly word for word, Abigail Smith Adams's account of her own voyage to England in 1784!<sup>2</sup>

Many documents by women have been destroyed. No letters of Catherine van Rensselaer Schuyler, wife of General Philip Schuyler, exist, or of Dorothy Quincy Hancock, wife of the first signer of the Declaration of Independence. From the lively Catherine Littlefield Greene, wife of General Nathaniel Greene, only one letter remains. What happened to the letters she—and many other women—wrote? Were they lost during the war or over time? Were they perhaps thought inconsequential? Did men with an eye on the future destroy letters that might have reflected poorly on their families or honor? John Jay destroyed many of his family papers before his death, and his sons culled the voluminous correspondence even further in subsequent years. Only two letters between Martha and George Washington have survived—surely there were more. It seems she destroyed them.

These losses leave a gap, not unlike a missing piece in a puzzle. We attempt to fill it by listening to the voices of other women to gain insight into that era. Each writer, when first introduced in this volume, is placed in the context of the narrative, although some biographical information may be found in the *Dramatis Personae*. We have tried to retain the authenticity of each woman's spirit by using as much of a document as possible but have done judicious editing when necessary. Since part of the attraction of the manuscripts—letters, diaries, contemporary newspaper submissions—lies in their tone and style, most of the prevailing conventions have been retained, including abbreviations and contractions although without superscript. When the meaning is not clear, the word has been

supplied. For example, because *wh* may mean *with* or *which*, we provide the appropriate word.

That punctuation during this period was minimal will soon become evident to readers. Periods have been added where thoughts clearly end, or to break up run-on sentences; the ubiquitous dashes have sometimes been replaced by periods or semicolons. Sentences thus created begin with capital letters. Long sections have been divided into paragraphs for ease of reading.

Spelling tended to be arbitrary, but we have transcribed the words as written, clarifying only to aid comprehension. It may sometimes be helpful to say the word aloud: “Gaus” but we added “[gauze]” after it. English spellings were still in use, such as in “neighbour” and “favour.” Only for Deborah Franklin and her sister-in-law Jane Mecom have we silently modernized the spelling, believing that the reader’s appreciation of their thoughts would be seriously diminished by having to decipher each word. Thus, Deborah Franklin’s “All our good friends Colle on us as yousall” becomes “All our good friends call on us as usual.” The use of some words may also strike the reader as odd because of changes in meaning: “condescension” in the eighteenth century meant a gracious acknowledgment of someone’s opinion, while today the word has a more patronizing connotation; the word “interesting” was a synonym for “important.”

We urge readers to savor the variety and richness of the voices heard in these documents, to reflect on the difficulties and complexities in the accounts that they share with us, and to marvel at their hardiness and commitment. We invite you to be a witness as the women speak for themselves.

“Hear us, therefore, for we speak of things that concern us.”

Women of the Seneca Nation 1790

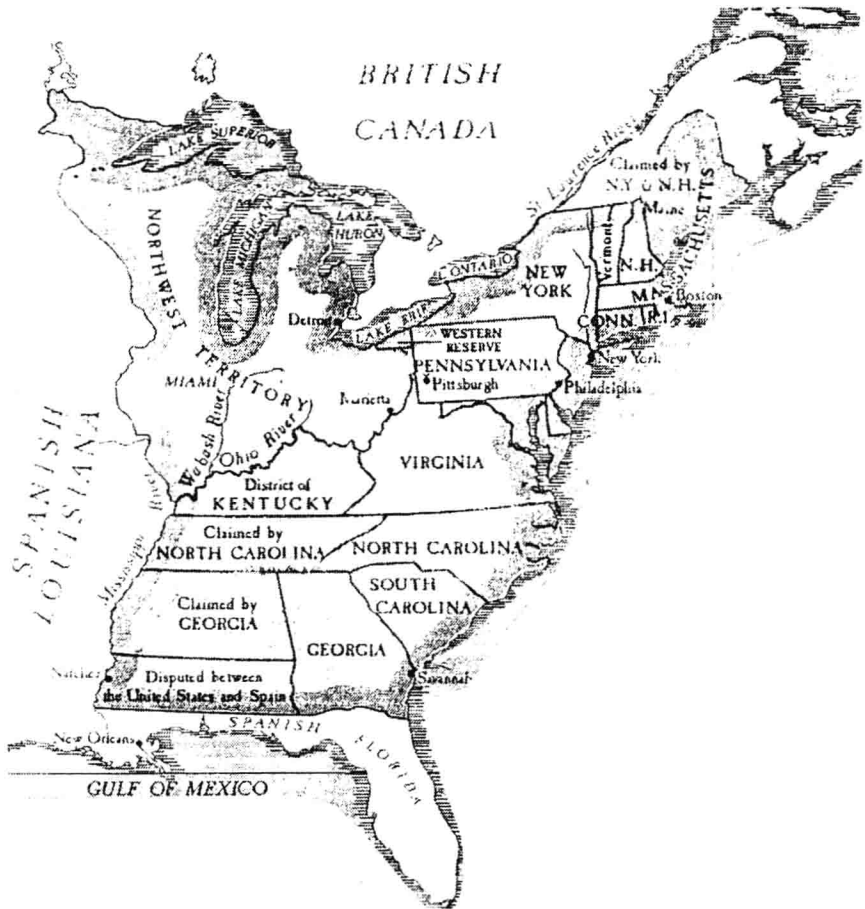


Figure 3. Map of the United States (ca. 1784).

# Timeline

- 1754-1763 French and Indian War between the British and the French and their allies by which the victorious British acquire Canada and all land east of the Mississippi River (except for New Orleans). Part of a larger conflict called the Seven Years War (1756-1763).
- 1763 In the Proclamation of 1763, the British declare the western frontier closed to settlement.
- 1765 The Stamp Act imposes a direct tax on colonists to offset British war debts. Protesting “taxation without representation,” colonists organize the Sons of Liberty, meet in the Stamp Act Congress, and refuse to buy British goods.
- 1766 Parliament repeals the Stamp Act, but reaffirms its right to legislate for and tax the colonies.
- 1767 The Townshend Acts levy new taxes to pay the costs of governing and protecting the colonies.
- 1768 Boston is occupied by the British.
- 1770 Parliament repeals the Townshend duties, except for the tax on tea. The Boston Massacre occurs.
- 1773 The tea tax is reduced, but Britain grants a monopoly on the sale of tea to the East India Company, causing further resentment. The Boston Tea Party.
- 1774 Parliament passes the Coercive Acts to punish Boston. The First Continental Congress meets in Philadelphia.
- 1775 Violence erupts in Lexington and Concord between colonists and British soldiers, who try to seize rebel ammunition depots. Boston is under siege. The Second Continental Congress is convened; it names George Washington commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. An American expedition to take Canada fails. The British attack on American fortifications at Bunker’s Hill and Breed’s Hill succeeds but the British suffer huge losses.
- 1776 The British evacuate Boston. Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* is published. Congress approves the Declaration of Independence, which is publicly proclaimed throughout the colonies.

- 1776 The British attack New York. Washington retreats into New Jersey, leaving the British in control of the city.  
In a surprise attack on December 26, Washington crosses the Delaware and captures Trenton from a Hessian force.
- 1777 States draw up their constitutions.  
Patriots are defeated in the battle of Brandywine.  
The British occupy Philadelphia.  
American forces defeat British General Burgoyne at Saratoga.  
The patriot army winters at Valley Forge.
- 1778 France agrees to an alliance with the United States.  
The British abandon Philadelphia and return to New York.  
Savannah falls to the British.
- 1779 American General Benedict Arnold turns traitor.
- 1780 Charleston is taken by the British.
- 1781 The Articles of Confederation are adopted.  
British General Cornwallis surrenders at Yorktown.
- 1782 The preliminary treaty of peace is agreed to in Paris.
- 1783 The definitive Treaty is signed.  
The British army evacuates New York.  
Washington resigns his commission and bids farewell to his troops.
- 1786-1787 The United States suffers from a postwar economic depression.  
Shays's Rebellion takes place in Massachusetts.
- 1787 A Constitutional Convention convenes in Philadelphia.  
Delegates propose and agree to a new Constitution.
- 1788 New York City becomes the temporary capital of the United States.  
Nine states ratify the Constitution ensuring its adoption.
- 1789 A new government is elected and takes effect.  
Washington is inaugurated as president.  
The French Revolution begins.
- 1790 Philadelphia named temporary capital of the United States until a new capital, called Washington, is built on a site on the Potomac.
- 1791 American General Arthur St. Clair and his forces are defeated by Indians in Ohio.  
The first ten amendments to the Constitution, known as the Bill of Rights, are ratified.
- 1795 Jay's Treaty with Britain is ratified in spite of much opposition.
- 1797 John Adams becomes the second president.
- 1798 The Alien and Sedition laws are passed.
- 1798-1800 In spite of troubles with France, war is averted.
- 1799 George Washington dies at Mount Vernon.



## Dramatis Personae

- Adams, Abigail Smith* (1744-1818) married lawyer John Adams in 1764. They had five children. A renowned letter writer, she often signed her letters with the nom-de-plume “Diana” or “Portia.”
- Adams, Mrs. Nathaniel Owen* (fl. 1777), wife of a blacksmith in White Plains, New York. Moved to Maugerville, New Brunswick, after the War.
- Akerly, Margaretta* (1782- ?), daughter of Samuel Akerly, a shipbuilder, and Priscilla Titus. She married (1803) Sylvanus Miller, a judge who served in the New York legislature.
- Ambler, Mary Cary* (1732-1781), daughter of Wilson Cary of Virginia; married (1754) Edward Ambler. They had two children, John and Sarah.
- Angell, Tryphena Martin* (fl. 1775-1790), daughter of Moses Martin of Salem, New York; married Augustus Angell.
- Asgill, Lady Sarah Theresa Pratviel* (d. 1816), daughter of the French Huguenot merchant Daniel Pratviel; second wife of Charles Asgill (d. 1788), merchant and, at one time, Lord Mayor of London. They had a son and a daughter.
- Bache, Sarah Franklin* (1743-1805), daughter of Benjamin Franklin and Deborah Read, half-sister of William. Married Richard Bache in 1767; their children included Benjamin F. Bache (1769-1798), later anti-Federalist newspaper editor. Her portrait by John Hoppner is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Bailey, Abigail Abbot* (1746-1815), daughter of Deacon James Abbot and Sarah Bancroft of New Hampshire. Married (1767) Asa Bailey; they had seventeen children.
- Bard, Sarah* (1754-1837), daughter of Peter Bard and Mary De Normandie; she was the youngest of eight children. Her sister Mary (1746-1821) married a cousin, Dr. Samuel Bard, in 1770. Sarah never married; eventually moved in with her sister in Hyde Park, New York [now the Vanderbilt Estate].
- Barnes, Christian Arbuthnot* (d. after 1792), daughter of John Arbuthnot and Abigail Little. She married Henry Barnes in 1746, settled in Marlborough, Massachusetts, where he became a merchant and served as a magistrate. They had one daughter, Chrisy (d. June 1782). They were proscribed and banished in 1778.