

## Women in American History, prior to 1848 \*

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Despite regional differences between New England, the Chesapeake, and the Middle Colonies of Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey with their large representation of Dutch and Quaker settlers, the lives of white colonial women bore many broad similarities. Almost every woman could expect to be married at some point in her life, often more than once if she was widowed. Once married, her life would include productive and reproductive labor: household management and food production alongside childbirth and child-rearing. The word “spinster” comes from spinning, but there were few unattached females in the colonies because the marriage rate for native-born women was so high.

By law and custom, married women’s lives in European coastal settlements followed a patriarchal model, with the husband as the head of the family and his wife and children his subordinates. That was also the model for the state, with the monarch playing the role of patriarch over his subordinate subjects. Indeed under the British common law doctrine of *feme covert* (a married woman who was covered or protected by her husband), women lost the ability to act independently at law when they married, the assumption being (as English jurist William Blackstone famously put it) that “by marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law.” And yet there were certain familial situations in which wives willingly took on roles usually assigned to men. Women married to sea captains or fur traders, who were often away for months at a time, or women whose husbands were conscripted to fight in the various Indian wars, in effect functioned as “deputy husbands.” As always, there was a gap between what prescriptive literature said women *ought* to be doing and the actual realities of their daily lives, which were often more fluid and complex.

Certain disorderly women pushed the boundaries even farther by failing to conform to the values of wifely submission, general subordination to men, and religious modesty. “You have stepped out of your place, you have rather bin a Husband than a Wife and a preacher than a Hearer; and a Magistrate than a Subject.”

That was the judgment of Reverend Hugh Peters on Anne Hutchinson, an elite woman in Massachusetts who challenged the religious authority of Puritan elders in the 1630s by holding meetings in her home where she discussed matters of theology and salvation with her followers. Hauled before the authorities, she was run out of town for her transgressions and relocated to Long Island, where she was killed in an Indian attack in 1643.

Mistress Margaret Brent of Maryland was more an extraordinary woman than a disorderly one, but she also rattled the status quo. An unmarried

woman of substantial property and standing, Brent defied gender expectations when she was appointed the lord proprietor’s attorney. Based on her appointment, she petitioned the colonial government in 1647 for the right to vote in Maryland’s general assembly. Her request was turned down, but the fact of her application shows how in the 1640s, class status could trump gender, at least enough to frame this unusual request.

The most disorderly and disturbing women of this period were those accused of being witches. The best known witch hunt is of course the one that occurred in Salem in 1692, but that was just the culmination of a long history of outbreaks, often at times when civil society was facing a crisis, such as deteriorating relationships with local Indians or conflicts over land distribution. Witches were predominantly women, and they were also predominantly older women, often those on the fringes of their communities for various reasons: a scold, a meddler, a troublemaker, an angry neighbor. In other words, they posed a potential threat once they made their supposed pact with the devil but were also more vulnerable to accusation because of their outlier status. And in a generational twist, their accusers were often young girls, perhaps enjoying the thrill of being the center of attention—“Whats that?” demanded seventeen-year-old Mercy Short, “Must the Younger Women, do yee say, hearken to the Elder?”—as the accusations were hurled. At Salem, 115 local residents were accused of being witches, three-quarters of them women, and nineteen were executed. Only when religious and political leaders stepped in to quell the hysteria did it end. While there were a tiny number of witchcraft accusations after 1692, Salem basically represented the end of the line. It was almost as if the colonists decided to put aside the premodern beliefs in the supernatural that were common to rural agrarian communities in favor of a more secular approach to civic life.

Another manifestation of changing mores was the onset of the “consumer revolution” beginning around 1700. Historians use this phrase to convey the new focus on buying and owning things for personal and domestic use—stuff, as it were—that accompanied rising prosperity and a move beyond subsistence and survival to a more vibrant mercantile economy as well as a society more stratified by class. Here is a simple illustration. In the seventeenth century, colonial houses were sparsely furnished. Life revolved around the hearth. Families ate dinner off of a table-board topped with several trenchers containing hollowed bowls to hold the food, which was eaten with spoons; beverages were drunk from a single flagon passed around the table. Colonists, especially children, often ate standing up because there were few chairs or stools. Cooking implements were utilitarian, as was clothing. Privacy was nonexistent. When guests came to stay, they often shared the family bed.

In the eighteenth century households looked quite different, even at the lower end of the social strata. There were china plates and silver or pewter utensils for eating and chests of drawers for storing extra clothing and linens.

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\* Ware, Susan. *American Women’s History: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Instead of guests being welcomed into the kitchen, they were now entertained in a formal parlor whose only function was for receiving visitors. Larger and more elaborate houses needed things to fill them up. So where did these material goods come from? The thriving Atlantic trade, which linked the American colonies to the markets of Europe and beyond. Instead of thinking of the colonies as isolated backwaters, think of them as active participants in a vibrant Atlantic culture that reigned on both sides of the ocean.

One of the most spectacular examples of this interconnected Atlantic world was the widespread dispersal and consumption of printed material. By the 1700s, colonists in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston were reading the same books and broadsides as their counterparts in London, Edinburgh, and Bath. They had access to newspapers with information and gossip from this wider world. They could follow new fashions and traffic in new ideas.

Some of the most enthusiastic consumers of this new Atlantic culture were white women, especially those who lived in the colonies' thriving merchant centers. Women bought the china and then used it to serve tea (the quintessential consumer product, which quickly went from luxury to necessity) to their guests in their elaborately decorated parlors while wearing the newest fashions from London or Paris. While sipping their tea, they discussed the news from abroad or books they had recently read, such as Samuel Richardson's epistolary novels *Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and *Clarissa: Or the History of a Young Lady* (1748). Things had come a long way from the harsh and primitive conditions that had greeted white settlers when they first arrived in the early 1600s. The American colonies were definitely coming of age by 1750.

Midcentury is also an important mark for changing attitudes about white women's roles in colonial society. In the seventeenth century women's lives were defined by their roles as wives, daughters, and widows within a patriarchal family and state. "Women's sphere" did not exist, because women were not necessarily thought of as a separate category or entity from men. To be sure, women's lives were profoundly shaped by their gender (Native American women's lives too), but they were primarily seen as members of communities or families rather than a group apart.

By 1750, especially in the transatlantic literature that colonists were reading, it is possible to see the inklings of a new view of women: "'Tis woman's sphere to mind / Their Children and their House," wrote an eighteenth-century poet. Instead of hearty colonial housewives slaughtering livestock or fending off Indian attacks, white women were now referred to as "the fair sex," increasingly associated with the family, and less involved, at least in theory, with the broader public world. This growing split between the public and the private assigned a higher priority to motherhood as a specific role for women, with women now given large responsibilities for the moral and intellectual growth of their children, a role that previously had devolved to patriarchal fathers. A loving conjugal relation between husband and wife also

became more important, with the choice of a mate now one of the most significant decisions a woman could make. And in terms of religion, women increasingly filled the pews of eighteenth-century churches and would continue to do so in the nineteenth. As congregations became predominantly female, piety became even more associated with women.

It is easier to document these emerging trends than to explain why they happened, but the changes were obviously linked to broader historical developments. The explosive growth of commercial capitalism and a thriving mercantile economy spanning the globe spread goods and ideas far and wide. The Glorious Revolution in England in 1688 transformed the relationship between monarchs and their subjects, as did the rise of Enlightenment thought, such as John Locke's *Two Treatises on Government* (1690), which proposed that political authority came from "social compacts," not divine right. Finally, a new understanding of biology and physiology after 1700 encouraged the division of humans into a two-sex model, rather than women being seen simply as lesser or inadequate versions of men. This new emphasis on difference grounded in fixed biological categories encouraged the view that women as a group were fundamentally different from—and potentially inferior to—men.

This new focus on women's sphere can be seen as diminishing women's extensive colonial roles, narrowing their lives to primarily home and family. This mindset also clearly applied more to privileged white women than to female slaves or Native American women. And yet by introducing a new concept of womanhood, the ideology fostered a sense of sisterhood that encouraged women to think of themselves as a shared group. Indeed that very gender solidarity eventually became the rationale for the birth of an aggressive nineteenth-century women's rights movement, which challenged and eventually overturned the very notion of limiting women to a restricted sphere. The emerging ideology thus opened the door for future generations of American women to take a larger role in affairs far beyond the domestic realm. This ongoing expansion of opportunities, and which women were able to seize them, and when, characterizes American women's history from the eighteenth century all the way to the present.

In 1787 a fourteen-year-old African American slave named Sally Hemings journeyed to Paris as a servant in the household of her master, Thomas Jefferson, then serving as the ambassador to France from the newly established United States of America. When she returned to Virginia in 1789, she was pregnant. That child did not survive, but four other children did. Confirming generations of rumors, DNA evidence strongly suggests that Thomas Jefferson was the father of Sally Hemings's children.

Despite being born into slavery, Sally Hemings's mixed-race identity tied her intricately to the white world. Her mother, Betty, a slave on the Virginia

plantation of John Wayles, had a sexual relationship with her master that produced several children, including Sally. When Wayles died in 1773, Betty and her children became the property of Thomas Jefferson, who had married Wayles's daughter, Martha, the year before. Martha Jefferson, worn out after bearing six children in less than ten years, died at the young age of thirty-four in 1782. Thomas Jefferson never remarried, an unusual choice for a man of his age and standing. One possible reason was his long-standing relationship with Sally Hemings, who was actually Jefferson's deceased wife's half-sister. The ties of slavery and bondage were intricate and complicated indeed.

Sally Hemings never spoke publicly or engaged in political acts, but she still was a significant historical figure for the role she played in the life of Thomas Jefferson, the country's third president. Her relationship with Jefferson was something of an open secret, especially with the existence of extremely light-skinned children bearing an uncanny resemblance to the Monticello master. Gossip about their relationship even played a role in the 1800 presidential campaign, yet it took almost two hundred years for the truth to be confirmed.

As a human being and a slave, Sally Hemings stands at the uneasy juxtaposition of liberty and slavery that was the legacy of the American Revolution. Her owner and the father of her children helped to conceive the new democratic experiment that became the United States of America at the same time he acquiesced in (indeed, profited from) the institution of slavery. As a woman and a slave, Sally Hemings's life story mocks the Declaration of Independence's notion that all men were created equal. Combining race and sex (two strikes against her), her life allows us to ask what slavery meant for women, white and black. Further, what would it take to win the freedom of both slaves and women, and who would plead their cause?

Just as democracy and slavery functioned as co-dependents in the early republic, so too did slavery and the early industrial revolution. Slavery produced the cotton that was sent north to be woven into textiles by the young farm girls who flocked to the new mills in Lowell, Massachusetts; the northern economy was just as dependent on raw materials from the South as the South was on northern capital and credit. So let us not draw the contrasts between a free North and a slave South too starkly. Further complicating the story is the multicultural West, whose heterogeneous populations (Anglo, Mexican, Spanish, Native American, and Chinese) were far more diverse than their northern and southern counterparts, and where gender often played out in unexpected ways.

Another defining characteristic of the early republic, especially in the Northeast, was the remarkable range of benevolent, religious, and political associations founded to confront the ills of society. White women played a key role in this reform impulse, despite the prevailing ideology that relegated them to the private sphere of their homes and families. Stretching from religious benevolence to temperance to antislavery activism and even women's rights,

women's participation in a broad range of activities reminds us that the line between public and private was quite porous indeed.

### Revolutionary legacies

What did the American Revolution mean to the new nation's women? In part it depends on which women. Certainly enslaved women saw little change in their status, despite the lofty rhetoric about liberty and equality contained in the Declaration of Independence. More broadly, the American Revolution did not radically change the lives of most American women, especially when it came to political rights and legal status. And yet it provided openings, especially for elite white women, to play larger roles in the new democracy. In 1798 playwright and poet Judith Sargent Murray predicted the dawn of "a new era of female history," and these changes in consciousness would play themselves out for decades to come.

Despite a prevailing ideology that defined women in terms of their homes and families, women could not have remained aloof from events leading up to the break with Great Britain even if they had wanted to. Embedded in a civil war that raged all around them and forced everyone to take sides, women tentatively began to forge a new relationship to the public realm. In Mercy Otis Warren's spirited words, "as every domestic enjoyment depends on the decision of the mighty contest, who can be an unconcerned and silent spectator?" Because of housewives' central roles as consumers, the calls to boycott imported British goods like tea and cloth would have failed without women's support. Think of these boycotts as the politicization of the household, where a simple decision about whether to drink British tea or buy a British book took on major political dimensions. Similarly, when women decided to make their own homespun cloth, their collaborative spinning bees represented a pointed anti-British stance.

The Revolutionary War temporarily disrupted gender expectations in a number of ways. Once the war officially began in 1776, patriotic women took on new roles. The Ladies Association of Philadelphia was so successful in raising funds for the army that it earned a commendation from General George Washington himself for its "female patriotism." Women whose husbands went off to war or served in the new government had to cope on their own; Abigail Adams's famous entreaty to her husband John to "Remember the Ladies" was written during one of his lengthy absences. Women married to Loyalist men who sided with the British saw their lives totally upended, especially if they did not agree with their husband's decision; their efforts to use legal recourse after the war to regain confiscated property highlighted the limits of women's independent legal standing. Finally, some women (Deborah Sampson, for example, who donned men's clothing and later received a pension for her service) actually fought in the war. More typical were the camp followers, wives

and other women who trailed along with the ragtag colonial army and helped with the cooking, laundry, and other traditional female chores.

Probably the largest changes for women during the Revolutionary era were changes in consciousness epitomized by the concept of “republican motherhood.” In a new democratic country, the mothers of the republic were tasked with instilling in their sons the qualities of virtue, piety, and patriotism necessary to the young country’s future. And in order to do this properly, they themselves needed more access to newspapers and knowledge of current events and books. While such a role was a long way from full participation in political life, it was an opening wedge.

As a corollary, the emphasis on republican motherhood encouraged a pragmatic new interest in education for women. Granted, expanding access to education was mainly to make women better wives and mothers, but linking erudition to republican ideals made it less threatening. (Previously too much learning had been thought to unsex women, making them unfit for marriage and domestic duties.) In the early years of the republic, the topic of women’s education received wide discussion, starting with the publication of Dr. Benjamin Rush’s pamphlet “Thoughts on Female Education” in 1787. Soon a range of finishing schools and female academies sprang up; Emma Willard’s founding of her eponymous school in Troy, New York, in 1819 exemplifies this trend. Other female seminaries followed, although confined mainly to the Northeast. As a byproduct, women found new opportunities as teachers in the expanding public and private school systems; by midcentury, a quarter of the nation’s teachers were women, although the figure was much higher (four-fifths) in Massachusetts, a harbinger of the future. With a few notable exceptions, however, such as the founding of coeducational Oberlin College in 1833, the broad expansion of collegiate education for women would have to wait until after the Civil War.

While the American Revolution did not dramatically reshape women’s lives, it did set in motion a range of other changes that affected the early history of the country and its female inhabitants. One of the most significant was the resumption of an expansive westward thrust after the cessation of hostilities.

The original colonies, now organized as a federation of states, filled up the backcountry, burst over the Appalachian mountains, and then just kept going; a similar surge happened after the Civil War. Some of the biggest losers were the Native American tribes that had populated the land along the eastern seaboard as well as the Northwest Territory, bounded by the Ohio River. No longer essential partners for trade and survival, Native nations were increasingly seen as major impediments to land acquisition and permanent Euro-American settlement. No one asked why the space could not just continue to be shared.

The Cherokee are a case in point. The traditional Cherokee way of life had already undergone significant changes after contact with European settlers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, specifically a larger emphasis on

war and trade (in deerskins), which elevated men’s roles relative to women, who continued their traditional focus on farming and food production, especially corn. The aftermath of the American Revolution led to new pressures on their land, which was desired by white settlers in the new state of Georgia who self-servingly reasoned that since the Cherokee were not actively cultivating all their commonly held land, they did not have a right to it. At the same time, a focus on “civilizing” the Cherokee tried to remake them along European lines, which consisted of turning men into farmers (even though this had always been women’s work in Cherokee culture) and encouraging women’s subservience in domestic matters. The Cherokee adapted the new ways selectively, but no matter what they did, they were in the end defenseless against an aggressive U.S. policy that mandated forced cession of tribal lands to white settlers and the relocation of the Cherokee to territory far beyond the boundaries of the United States at the time. Thus began the Trail of Tears, the forced removal of the Cherokee nation to Indian territory in the future state of Oklahoma in 1838-1839. Not only did they lose all their land, but disease and hardship also significantly decimated their population along the way.

This seemingly insatiable hunger for land had similarly deleterious effects on whichever tribes were in the way of white settlement, whether they be the Choctaw in Mississippi, the Iroquois in upstate New York, or the Sauk in Wisconsin. The new federal policy, which eventually was codified in the Dawes Act of 1887, increasingly consigned Native Americans to federal reservations, especially in Oklahoma, but also much farther west in what became Arizona, New Mexico, and South Dakota, while opening large swaths of former Indian land to white settlement. And yet despite these geographical and cultural dislocations, Native tribes still demonstrated the cultural persistence that had characterized all encounters since the first contact with European settlers.

Similar patterns of contact, assimilation, and change were at work throughout the West. Actually “the West” is a bit of a misnomer: from the perspective of Mexico, which controlled much of this land until 1846, this same territory was its northern frontier. Ever since initial contact, the dominant pattern in the borderlands with Mexico had been cultural interaction and accommodation interspersed with periods of violence and warfare. For example, during the Spanish and (after 1821 independence) Mexican occupations of what became New Mexico in 1848, an extensive system of captive exchange involved both Indian women and to a lesser degree Spanish and Mexican women, who literally crossed between cultures through capture, ransom, or sale. Then through adoption and marriage, many of these female captives stayed in their new culture, establishing families and being integrated into the community. More broadly, intermarriage between Mexican women and explorers, traders, and Natives occurred long before Anglos appeared on the scene—and continued afterward. In this fluid setting, women played critical roles as the cultural mediators between Mexican, Native, and Anglo cultures.

While Anglo traders and trappers had been exploring and exploiting western lands for decades, the white presence took a significant leap forward in 1843 with the mapping of the Overland Trail. Over the next twenty years, more than 350,000 individuals made the arduous, two-thousand-mile trip from the Missouri River across the plains and the Rockies, with Oregon and California as their goal. Many of these migrants traveled in family groups, drawn by the prospect of new lives and fertile, bountiful land that was presented as waiting to be settled. Except, of course, that it was far from empty.

A mythic view of the frontier still holds a powerful sway on the popular imagination (especially where Hollywood is concerned), and gender is central to this story. In the traditional telling, heroic cowboys, Indians, miners, bandits, soldiers, and farmers battle nature and each other as they work to “tame” the West. The limitations of this view of the American West should be readily apparent. It focuses attention mainly on the relatively short period of Euro-American western expansion and ignores the ways the American West had long been a vibrant cultural crossroads. And it represents the archetypal westerner as male. When women are mentioned at all, they fall into predictable stereotypes: the prostitute (with or without a heart of gold) and “the gentle tamer” bringing East Coast civilization to the wild and savage West solely by her presence.

Not surprisingly, the story of the women’s West is more complex and far more interesting than those stereotypes, starting with women on the Overland Trail. These hardy pioneers with their sunbonnets and sturdy boots made painful choices about what to take and what to leave behind as they loaded up a lifetime’s worth of possessions onto Conestoga wagons. Gender was definitely a factor here: usually it was men’s decision, not women’s, to seek a new life in the American West. “O let us not go,” Mary A. Jones confided abjectly to her diary after her husband read a book about California and proposed relocating the family halfway across the continent. In many ways, women on the move had more to lose—their established homes, their female friends, their churches and associations—to say nothing of facing specifically female hardships on the trail, such as pregnancy and childbirth. No doubt some unwilling pioneers rued their fates every step of the way.

And yet other women, either single or in families, seized the opportunities for a new life less encumbered by traditions and constraints. Women schoolteachers were an especially hearty—and valued—bunch.

Whereas families traveled the Overland Trail, it was primarily single men who joined in the Gold Rush that took off in California in 1849, causing a huge gender imbalance: women made up only 8 percent of California’s population in 1850, the year it became a state. In the boomtown, get-rich-quick atmosphere, it literally was a world upside down: without women to perform traditional services like cooking and cleaning, men had to learn to do it themselves or do without.

In addition to the temporary destabilizing of gender roles, California offered extraordinary demographic diversity. Its culture was influenced by its early Spanish roots and later by dominion by Mexico. The vast majority of native Californians were of *mestizo* or Mexican background, but Anglo arrivals deployed the term “Spanish” to differentiate elite women belonging to landowning families who had married Europeans or Euro-Americans (the supposedly “good” women) from non-elite Mexican women, whom Anglos presumed to be immoral as well as racially impure. And yet even with the creation of this faux Spanish heritage, the racial and ethnic lines in California were never neatly drawn. California at midcentury also contained as many as twenty-five thousand Chinese immigrants, almost exclusively men, who came as part of the Gold Rush, as well as a robust indigenous Native American population. Confirming a pattern that had occurred in the East and the Midwest, the relentless pressure of Anglo expansion and settlement along what was considered a “frontier” had deleterious effects on Native populations, such as the Miwok, for whom the same land was their long-established home. Anglo women as well as Anglo men reaped the rewards of the removal of Mexican and Indian populations from their ancestral lands.

In contrast to the multicultural West, race was more of a binary, black-white issue in the South. And women were on both sides of that racial divide. White southern women, whether they were members of a slave owning family or not (about one-quarter of the region’s free population owned slaves), lived in an extremely patriarchal society that provided few outlets for participation in events and institutions beyond their homes and farming communities. Educational and cultural opportunities were limited, except in towns and cities, and churches did not play the central role they did in northern society. As the nineteenth century progressed, southern society turned more defensive about the institution of slavery, making southerners less willing to entertain challenges to traditional gender definitions either.

White southern women of the slave owning class lived side by side with their black slaves, male and female, their lives intertwined but uncomprehending. If a universal sisterhood united all women, one would expect to see solidarity between white mistresses and their female slaves. While scattered sentiments suggest that white women were less invested in the slave system than their men (“Southern women are, I believe, all abolitionists at heart” said slave owning Gertrude Ella Thomas of Georgia), most often these sentiments, penned privately, were directed more at the disagreeable aspects of managing slaves rather than slavery itself. White women had far, far more in common with their menfolk on the basis of shared racial and class privilege than they did with enslaved women.

Slave women’s status—or more accurately, their economic worth—was inextricably linked to their ability to reproduce the slave population. That fact of life did not keep them from trying to build stable families within the institution

of slavery. Most slaves were married (informally, that is, since these unions were not recognized by the law), but often to slaves on nearby plantations. (This was called an abroad marriage.) With the official end of the slave trade in 1808, the main way to meet the labor needs of the expanding southern cotton economy was through an internal slave trade; since males were more desirable as workers, they were sold to distant plantations in the Deep South at a higher rate, thereby breaking up the bonds that formed in the slave quarters. As a result the structure of many slave families was a loose extended family held together by the mother.

The daily life of female slaves was harsh. Only a few (no more than 5 percent, mainly on the largest plantations, and often the more light-skinned) worked as house servants; most toiled in the fields along with men, albeit usually in all-female work gangs. In addition to this demanding physical labor, which continued even during pregnancy and lactation, slave women were vulnerable to exploitation, sexual and otherwise, at the hands of white masters and foremen. Black women enjoyed far less control over their bodies than did white women. Sexual coercion of female slaves by white slave owners was common, producing a range of mixed-race children who kept their mother's slave status at the same time they bore the patrilineage of the master. Yet their existence, as the case of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson shows, was acknowledged only obliquely. Southern slave owner Mary Boykin Chesnut captured the way white mistresses simultaneously knew what was going on while they looked the other way: "Any lady is able to tell who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household but their own. Those she seems to think drop from the clouds."

Let us return to Sally Hemings to put a human face on the story of slavery, using the Hemings family as a window on Virginia plantation life and how circumstances were often beyond the control of even the most trusted (and intimate) slaves. Despite the meticulous accounts Thomas Jefferson kept of the workings of his plantation at Monticello, he was unable to keep his expenses in line with his income, so the estate began to rack up enormous debt. At one point he had to sell his cherished books to the Library of Congress to make ends meet. When Jefferson died in 1826, Monticello was in a state of fiscal and physical disrepair. His will made no specific mention of Sally Hemings; such an inclusion would have been much too public an acknowledgment of what everyone suspected. But all four of her children slipped into freedom before and after Jefferson's death, taking advantage of their light skins to simply blend into the Virginia population. Sally herself moved to Charlottesville with her two sons, where she lived until her death in 1835. Other slaves at Monticello did not fare so well: six months later at auction ("130 VALUABLE NEGROES" read the broadside), families were split up and slaves scattered to near and distant plantations, their fates largely lost to history.

Even with Thomas Jefferson as a master, there was no such thing as enlightenment when it came to the institution of slavery.

#### The female world of work and benevolence

"Thine in the bonds of womanhood." Thus did Sarah Grimke sign a letter to a friend in the year 1838. This sense of sisterhood had its roots in the eighteenth century but came to fruition in the Northeast in the first half of the nineteenth century in the concept of separate spheres, that is, the way in which women's lives were supposed to revolve around the familial and private, whereas men were expected to inhabit the wider world of politics, work, and public life. As the dual meanings of Grimke's phrase suggested, the doctrine of separate spheres both recognized the oppression of women while simultaneously suggesting a path toward female autonomy and empowerment through shared consciousness. But as an actual description of nineteenth-century women's lives, the concept remains flawed, even for the white middle-class women who were its main constituency. Instead of occupying a separate sphere based on sex, many elite women were closely linked to comparable men by race and class. And many women—slaves and free women of color, working-class women, and western pioneers, among others—were left outside this ideal entirely.

A "cult of true womanhood" defined by an emphasis on piety, purity, submission, and domesticity saturated early nineteenth-century prescriptive literature, specifically the women's magazines, books, and religious tracts dedicated to telling women how they ought to act. No one pushed this message more vigorously than Sarah Josepha Hale, the original editor of the *Ladies Magazine* (founded in 1828), who went on to spend forty years (1837-1877) as editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*. Filled with fiction, fashion, poetry, and (in the case of *Godey's*) individually hand-tinted illustrations, these periodicals both engaged and instructed the white middle-class women who were their target audiences. So, too, did some of the early housekeeping manuals, such as Lydia Maria Child's *The Frugal Housewife* (1829) and Catharine Beecher's widely read *Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841). If women wanted to escape from the demands of domesticity, they could turn to best-selling novels, many written by women, such as Catharine Sedgwick's *New-England Tale* (1827), Sarah Josepha Hale's *Northwood* (1827), Caroline Gilman's *Love's Progress; or Ruth Raymond* (1840), or Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850). In a class by itself was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which not only was a runaway best seller but also influenced the political and moral debates over slavery as the country edged toward civil war. According to *Harper's*, by the 1850s women made up an astounding four-fifths of the reading public.

An emerging middle class, with its rising incomes, expectations, and living standards, made this new lifestyle possible. Starting in the eighteenth century, the economy had grown and diversified, giving an urban and market-

oriented edge to what was still a predominantly agricultural country. American society had never been totally egalitarian—there were always rich and poor, even in the early colonial settlements—but the changes in the economy brought a more stratified class structure, especially in urban areas. At the center of this new system of exchange was cash: in the form of wages coming in for labor performed and goods sold, and money going out to buy a range of consumer goods and services that were no longer being produced in the household economy. Bostonian Abigail Lyman captured this shift perfectly when she exclaimed in 1797 “There is no way of living in this town without cash.”

The story of domestic service, long the domain of women, exemplifies this growing class stratification. In the colonial and early Revolutionary eras, it was common for married women to have as “hired help” a local girl, often a neighbor’s unmarried daughter, who came into the household on a casual basis to help out with household chores like cleaning, laundry, or cooking. In other words, she was basically the same class as her mistress. By the mid-nineteenth century, the gap between mistress and maid had dramatically widened. The women who took jobs as domestic servants were increasingly recent immigrants, especially from Ireland, and they often lived in as permanent but poorly paid employees. Critical to the rising housekeeping requirements of nineteenth-century households, domestic servants performed more specialized tasks while allowing middle-class families to flaunt their ability to afford such help. Heaven forbid that a mistress answer the door when a servant could do it.

And yet even the hiring of domestic servants did not free middle-class women from the demands of running a household. It merely redistributed the responsibilities to involve more supervision and less physical work. For example, middle-class women now devoted far more time to the instruction, moral or otherwise, of their children, a task that was rarely farmed out to servants. Well-brought-up children were now one of the main products of a middle-class family.

The labor that women performed in their homes in the early nineteenth century paralleled the growth of the large-scale economic development that historians call industrialization.

As men increasingly defined themselves and their roles by working for wages outside the home, labor became synonymous with wages, and wages became synonymous with male gender roles. However, women’s domestic labor, which was not paid, was not considered comparable work. Since the wages men earned were often barely enough to support a family, it was up to women to supply the difference, either by bringing in additional cash for the family coffers or by substituting their own labor for something that would otherwise involve an outlay of cash. Such economic activities could add as much as \$150 a year to a family budget, a hefty subvention. These contributions were not some abstract ideology of domesticity: these were real women doing

real work. And yet because women’s domestic work was generally unpaid and undervalued, it was practically invisible.

The insufficiency of men’s wages was especially problematic for working-class women and their families living in urban areas. Urban poverty was different from rural poverty, and working-class women struggled to scrounge needed resources for their families. In addition to taking in boarders (which brought in cash but also made more work for women), they might go out scavenging on the city streets with their children, looking for cast-off goods and food with which to feed the family. Women might take in piecework, earning pennies for work, such as sewing, that would later be consolidated in factories. Besides the precariousness of their existence, urban laboring women’s lives lacked any sharp distinctions between public and private, with the urban neighborhood rather than the private home serving as the basis for working-class women’s identity.

This focus on family and the household has implications beyond women’s domestic roles. The economic contributions women made to their family survival in many ways allowed early capitalists to pay their male workers lower wages—and hence earn higher profits themselves. Thus housewives were central to the successful launching of industrialization. The home itself was also affected by the industrial transformation. New household technologies like central furnaces, cast-iron cook-stoves, and sewing machines were beginning to reshape domestic chores and bring women’s work more in line with the “time and task” routines characteristic of industrial labor.

Some women, mainly young farm girls from rural New England, played an even more direct role, flocking to the Lowell mills in the 1830s and 1840s. Women have always worked, but the Lowell experiment was the first large-scale industrial undertaking whose owners welcomed, indeed relied on (cheap) female labor to make their textile products. Adjusting to repetitive working conditions and twelve-hour days six days a week was a challenge, but in many ways the excitement of living on their own in company boardinghouses compensated for the poor conditions. “Don’t I feel independent!” one mill worker wrote home to her sister in the 1840s. Kinship networks and cultural homogeneity also eased the transition to urban life. Confirming their sense of themselves as pioneers comparable to young men seeking their fortunes out West, Lowell mill girls contributed essays to the company-supported newspaper, the *Lowell Offering*, and later wrote books about their youthful experiences. Two of the best known are Lucy Larcom’s *A New England Girlhood* (1889) and Harriet Hanson Robinson’s *Loom and Spindle, or Life among the Early Mill Girls* (1898).

Alas, this heyday (if it ever was one) did not last. As early as the mid-1830s, female mill workers organized strikes to protest poor working conditions, long hours, and low pay; in the 1840s they formed labor unions. By then the owners of the mills had realized that New England farm girls were not the only cheap source of labor for their dramatically growing businesses: male

and female immigrants from Ireland, then in the grip of a terrible famine, increasingly supplied the labor that ran the mills. And what of the Lowell mill girls? Even though they usually only worked in the mills for a few scant years, the experience had a lifelong impact. As a group, they tended to marry later and were more likely to stay in towns and cities rather than returning to rural farm life. Work outside the home was definitely a transformative experience for multiple generations of American women.

So, too, was participation in the gamut of religious, charitable, and reform societies that flourished in the first half of the nineteenth century, mainly in the Northeast but also in the recently settled Midwest. Even though women lacked access to traditional forms of political influence, such as the vote or participation in political parties, they were still very much involved in a range of political and cultural issues of their day. To put it another way, foregrounding women's reform and benevolent activities encourages a dramatic broadening of what constitutes political history.

The starting point for understanding this burst of reform is religion, specifically women's central roles as members of churches. As English novelist Frances Trollope observed after living in the new nation for several years in the late 1820s, never had she seen a country "where religion had so strong a hold upon the women, or a slighter hold upon the men." But this religious fervor ebbed and flowed, subject to bursts of revivalism (such as the Great Awakening, from the 1750s to the 1770s, and then the Second Great Awakening of the 1820s and 1830s) that brought new converts, male and especially female, into the Protestant fold. All this religiosity needed an outlet beyond just going to church on Sundays, and benevolent societies and voluntary associations flowed naturally from new conversions. By one estimate, at least 10 percent of all the adult white women in the Northeast participated in some form of benevolent reform in these years.

Women's benevolent work covered a range of initiatives and interests. Maternal societies brought women together in their shared role as mothers. For example, the Dorchester (Massachusetts) Maternal Association was founded in 1816 by members who were "aware of our highly responsible situation as Mothers & as professing Christians" and wanted to "commend our dear offspring to God." In contrast, moral reform societies hoped to hold men and women to a single high standard of purity, the standard adhered to by women. To that end such groups as the Boston Female Moral Reform Society attacked the sin of licentiousness, dedicating themselves to rescuing women who had "fallen" into prostitution. More controversially, these groups also aimed to publicize—and ostracize—the men who visited these prostitutes. All of this was done in the name of female moral superiority.

In essence, these benevolent associations were an attempt to use private charity to deal with many of the social problems that the state would later take on. Reformers tackled the problems of destitute widows and

orphaned children, conditions for inmates in insane asylums and poorhouses, and public drunkenness. On more strictly religious grounds, voluntary associations supported missionary work abroad and promoted spiritual and personal improvement at home, especially temperance. These concerns were portrayed as especially well matched to women's heightened moral sensibilities, although women's rights activist Susan B. Anthony would have none of this, sneering: "Men like to see women pick up the drunken and falling. That *patching business* is 'woman's proper sphere.'" Anthony's dismissal notwithstanding, such benevolence provided access to activities more associated with the public than the private realm. Besides being numerous (as many as four hundred female moral reform societies existed in New York and New England by the 1840s), these groups were extremely sophisticated in their organization. Women ran meetings, organized outreach drives, raised and distributed vast sums of money, and publicized their activities, all while managing to keep up with their ongoing domestic responsibilities in the private sphere.

Until the 1830s almost all of women's benevolent and charitable work was in some way church related. (In contrast, men were free to join a range of civic, political, and religious associations.) At the core of women's benevolence was allegiance to the ideal of moral suasion, that is, trying to convince individuals to change their erring ways through personal persuasion. But there were limits to how much society could be transformed in this manner, and by the 1840s and 1850s some women had concluded that "moral suasion is moral balderdash." Beware, however, of seeing an inevitable progression from moral reform and benevolence to more radical undertakings. Only a hearty and bold minority made that leap.

Two of the most important movements that captured their energies were antislavery and women's rights. Slavery was both a political and a moral question for the early republic, and it was only resolved (and then incompletely) by the Civil War of the 1860s. Starting in the 1830s, as slavery became more entrenched and profitable in the South, northern abolitionists began to challenge slavery as morally wrong in a democratic society. In 1831 William Lloyd Garrison founded the New England Anti-Slavery Society and welcomed women who shared his views, such as Quaker activist Lucretia Mott and former slave Sojourner Truth. Two early converts were Angelina and Sarah Grimke, sisters and southerners who turned against their heritage by embracing abolition. (Angelina would later marry fellow abolitionist Theodore Weld). Their presence caused consternation in the movement, however, when Sarah began to speak in public to mixed (or "promiscuous") audiences of both men and women, an act deemed too radical even to a committed bunch of radicals.

But she would not be silenced, and soon other women added their public voices to the cause. This participation opened their eyes not just to the plight of the African American slave but eventually to women's plight as well. As abolitionist and women's rights activist Abby Kelley Foster put it eloquently,

“We have good cause to be grateful to the slave. In striving to strike his irons off, we found most surely, that we were manacled ourselves.”

Lucy Stone and Elizabeth Cady Stanton also came to women’s rights through antislavery. Stone was one of the first women to attend college (Oberlin class of 1847) and after graduation became an itinerant speaker for antislavery and women’s rights. She would later marry abolitionist Henry Blackwell in a ceremony in which she refused to promise to obey her husband and pledged to keep her family name, hence the designation of women who followed her example as “Lucy Stoners.” Elizabeth Cady grew up as the daughter of a judge in upstate New York, where sampling the law books in his library indelibly introduced her to discrimination against women in the law; when she married reformer Henry Stanton in 1840, they spent their honeymoon in London at a world antislavery conference. When women delegates were forced to sit in a balcony separately from the men, this slight was too much for Stanton and Mott, and together they vowed to hold a convention dedicated to women’s rights. It took eight years before it came off, and when it did, it was in a tiny village in upstate New York, where the Stantons had settled with their growing family.

The Seneca Falls convention of 1848 was not, as is often asserted, the first conference ever held on the question of women’s rights, but it has assumed a preeminent place in the history of feminism and women’s rights. On two days in July, approximately three hundred people, including forty men, gathered in the local Methodist church in response to a call to discuss “the social, civil and religious condition of Woman” that had been drafted by Stanton, Mott, and Martha Coffin Wright at Stanton’s kitchen table. (That table is now in the Smithsonian Institution.) Often these women are portrayed as simple housewives, but they were already savvy and experienced reformers, and they were determined not to back down, even when Henry Stanton threatened to leave town. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was their wordsmith, and she turned to the Declaration of Independence for inspiration, boldly restating its central concept in this unforgettable way: “All men and women are created equal.”

The Declaration of Sentiments adopted at Seneca Falls presented eighteen instances of “repeated injuries and usurpation on the part of man toward woman,” including the denial of the basic right of citizenship, the lack of married women’s property rights, the exclusion of women from profitable employment, and the lack of access to education. All of these issues had been circulating separately for the past few decades, but the document pulled them together to make a compelling case for women as necessary subjects of a reform movement of their own. Eleven resolutions followed, all of which passed easily, with the exception of the call “to secure to themselves their sacred right to elective franchise,” which just squeaked by. Why was woman suffrage so fraught? Because women voting alongside men would have been the ultimate challenge to the notion of politics and public life as men’s sphere. Not until

1920, a full seventy-two years after Seneca Falls, would that right finally be achieved with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment.

Absent from Seneca Falls was Susan B. Anthony, who was living in nearby Rochester and about to embark on a career as a temperance lecturer after a decade of teaching school. Soon dissatisfied with the secondary roles that women were expected to play in the temperance movement, she gravitated toward women’s rights. In 1851 she met Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the two formed one of the greatest political partnerships in women’s history.

By then the notion of a separate women’s sphere was clearly under assault. As a resolution at another early women’s rights convention stated, “The proper sphere for all human beings is the largest and highest to which they are able to attain.” Margaret Fuller, unquestionably the most prominent woman intellectual in antebellum America, was thinking along similar lines in her influential *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, published in 1845: “We would have every arbitrary barrier thrown down. We would have every path laid open to Woman as freely as to Man.” Thus did the political and intellectual ferment originally unleashed by the American Revolution continue to deepen and grow.

This ferment was actually a worldwide phenomenon, as a wave of uprisings and insurrections swept Europe in the revolutions of 1848. Margaret Fuller reported on these developments from Italy for Horace Greeley’s *New-York Tribune*, making her America’s first female war correspondent. Constituting what was arguably the first international women’s movement, women on both sides of the Atlantic seized the moment to demand changes in women’s status in society. In the Western Hemisphere, 1848 marked the end of the Mexican-American War and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, by which Mexico ceded its vast northern territories stretching from Texas to California to the United States. It was not just at Seneca Falls, therefore, that new ideas about citizenship and democracy, as well as nationalism, were beginning to reshape American society, indeed the whole world.