

## Life in Early America (1600-1800)

**Directions:** Keep these discussion questions in mind as you read the background essay, making marginal notes as desired. Respond to the reflection and analysis questions at the end of the essay.

### Discussion Questions

- Prior to 1800, how might women have exercised political influence without the right to vote?
- List some possible reasons for restricting the right to vote to property owners.
- List some possible reasons for denying the right to vote to women.

### Overview

In early America, free women almost always had essentially the same legal status as children. But despite their many legal restrictions, women neither viewed nor conducted themselves as **non-entities**. They exercised their responsibilities of citizenship by raising future citizens of a republic and through their powers of persuasion—private and public. Though the suffrage movement was almost a century away, initial strides toward women’s equality can be found in the early republic. The women highlighted in this essay are but a few of the countless numbers who took their responsibilities as citizens seriously, even in a society that did not treat them as legal equals.

### Margaret Brent of Maryland

Margaret Brent was born into a wealthy family in Gloucester, England in 1601. She and her siblings emigrated to Maryland in 1638, holding letters from Lord Baltimore Cecil Calvert in England entitling them to large grants of

land. She was the first woman in Maryland to own land in her own name. An independent and entrepreneurial woman, Margaret Brent purchased additional tracts of land and became a trusted assistant of Maryland Governor Leonard Calvert, brother of Lord Baltimore. The provincial court appointed her Lord Baltimore Cecil Calvert’s attorney as well. In 1647, Leonard Calvert on his deathbed appointed Brent **executor** of his will. She managed his estate, argued cases before the provincial assembly, and quelled a disturbance by hiring soldiers to put down William Claiborne’s rebellion against the Calverts.

The following year, because of her service to the colony, Brent requested membership in Maryland’s colonial legislature, along with two votes, one as Cecil Calvert’s attorney and one for herself as a major landowner. She may have been the only woman in what came to be the United States to personally request an appeal before a session of a colonial assembly. However, Governor Thomas Greene refused her request. Lord Baltimore Cecil Calvert in England

disapproved of her “scandalous...avaricious... presumptuous” behavior, writing to her, “Further, we are inflicted by your indelicacy in demanding a voice and vote in our Assembly there on our behalf. This mortification might well be brought upon us by the spouse of a fishmonger; that one of your high birth should so publicly forget her position gives us embarrassment and great vexation of spirit.” Calvert then named his friend William Stone as his family’s new attorney and governor of the colony.

Stone recognized the value of Brent’s work to preserve the colony and wrote to Lord Baltimore, “It was better for the colony’s safety at that time, in her [Margaret Brent’s] hands, than in any man’s else in the whole Province after your brother’s death.” Nevertheless, offended at Calvert’s refusal to recognize her contribution to the survival of the colony, Brent moved to Virginia in 1651, where she bought more large land holdings. She settled in Westmoreland County, a woman of great wealth and influence in her community, and died there in 1671.

## Expectations Regarding Women’s Roles

Margaret Brent’s story is unusual, but not only because she was a courageous, resourceful immigrant who became a powerful business woman and landowner. Any woman who chose to emigrate to the raw Maryland settlement in the 1630s would have required a sense of adventure, strength, courage, and adaptability. What made Brent’s story exceptionally rare was that she achieved wealth, leadership, and influence in her own name as a single woman and not as an accessory of her husband or brothers.

When thinking about women’s lives in early America, it is important to remember that women were not a single **homogeneous** group. Slavery was legal in every colony, and enslaved women’s

work was often as physically demanding as that expected of men. The vast majority of married women of European descent spent most of their days caring for children, cooking, making and mending clothing, and other domestic tasks. In addition, they were co-laborers on the family farms that made up 90% of the economy of early America. White women in the North were more likely than those in other areas to be literate and informed about politics, though it was socially unacceptable in most places for women to attend public meetings or speak in public events. The early 1800s saw the rise of the ideal of **Republican Motherhood**. This ideal, based on the supposed moral superiority of women over men and the greater amount of time that small children spent with their mothers, was that it was the special responsibility of mothers to raise children who would grow up to be good citizens of a republic. Because of that responsibility, education gradually became available to females, especially those who were middle- or upper-class whites.

Yet, free married women had the legal status of children. English legal theorist, William Blackstone, explained the doctrine of **coverture** in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765-1769): “The very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least incorporated or consolidated into that of the husband, under whose wing, protection, and cover she performs everything.” In other words, when a man married a woman, she was entirely under his authority. His legal, social, and economic status covered or concealed hers. She no longer had her own identity—her property and protection were his responsibility. While Quakers in Pennsylvania gave women some additional legal rights, women were mostly excluded from public life. Women were seen as weaker and more likely to be ruled by their emotions, and so it was considered unwise to give



▲ George Stubbs, *Haymakers*, 1785, Tate Britain.

them power to make political decisions, and it was inappropriate for women to speak in public. Families were seen as “little commonwealths” in which the man, as head of the family, represented their needs in the community as a whole. Wives would influence their husbands, but women’s duties and participation in the community were domestic. The idea that a wife would even think about politics for herself was ludicrous and a wife’s vote would simply echo the opinion of her husband. And yet, the status of a woman in most colonies changed radically if she became a widow. After her husband’s death, she could execute his will, own property, and make legal decisions for her children. But they still

were not permitted to participate in political matters other than those related to schools.

A similar rationale was behind denying the vote to men without property. Specifically, poor men were vulnerable to being manipulated by the rich. John Adams wrote in a 1776 letter that men who have no property talk and vote “as they are directed by some Man of Property, who has attached their mind to his interest.”

And yet, women did have opinions and influence in public life despite their many legal restrictions. As British policies moved away from the **benign neglect** of the early period and interfered with the **autonomy** of the colonies by the 1760s, some women joined in the protests of British policies. Just as they had contributed to



the survival and wealth of the establishment of the colonies, they participated in the movement toward separation from England and the American Revolution.

### Hannah Griffitts (1727-1817)

Poet Hannah Griffitts was one of these women. As a Quaker she did not support violent revolution, but she encouraged her fellow citizens to boycott British goods while working for reconciliation. In a 1768 poem called “The Female Patriots,” Griffitts wrote:

“Let the Daughters of Liberty nobly arise  
And tho’ we’ve no Voice but a negative here  
The use of the Taxables, let us forbear....  
Rather than Freedom, we’ll part with our  
Tea....”

Griffitts took part in the conversation that moved America toward independence, attempting to exert a moderating influence. She called Common Sense author Thomas Paine a “snake beneath the Grass,” accusing him of inflaming the public and drowning out more reasoned dialogue.

### Mercy Otis Warren (1728-1814)

Mercy Otis Warren was a wealthy, politically-connected writer who also influenced the colonies toward independence. In the years leading up to the Declaration of Independence, Warren criticized the colonial governor of Massachusetts and other British leaders in dramas including *Defeat* (1773) and *The Group* (1775). After independence was won, Warren continued to be involved in politics. As an Anti-Federalist, she opposed the ratification of the Constitution. Later, Warren became the first American woman to publish a non-fiction book, a history of the American Revolution: *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* (1805).



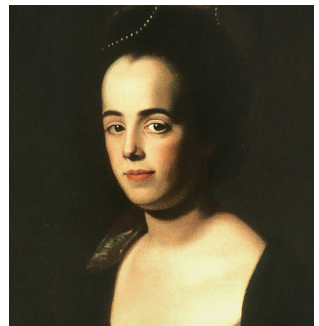
▲ Mercy Otis Warren. John Copley, 1763.



▲ Phillis Wheatley. Scipio Moorhead, 1773.



▲ Abigail Adams. Benjamin Blyth, 1766.



▲ Judith Sargent Murray. John Stevens, 1772.

### Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753-1784)

A decade before Griffitts was writing, an eight-year-old girl was kidnapped in West Africa and brought to Boston on a slave ship. She was purchased by John Wheatley, and, as was custom, took her master’s name, becoming Phillis Wheatley. At a time when enslaved people had no access to formal learning, Wheatley’s master and his wife made the unusual decision to educate her. She learned theology, literature, Latin, Greek, ancient history, and other subjects. She went on to become an accomplished poet, publishing her first poem when she was only 13. Her 1773 volume *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was the first book published by a slave. Wheatley’s master freed her soon after this book was published. As the nation approached independence, Wheatley supported the Patriot

cause. She dedicated poems to Commander of the Continental Army George Washington, who invited her to meet with him in 1776.

### Abigail Adams (1744-1818)

Abigail Adams is best known as First Lady, the wife of the second president, John Adams. With a keen business sense and formidable intellect, she ran the family's household (as was customary for wives when their husbands were away). She managed their farm and raised their children—including future President John Quincy Adams—mostly on her own while her husband traveled extensively.

Like her friend and correspondent Mercy Warren, Adams was determined to have a voice in the new republic. She wrote many letters to her husband John, including one in which she pointed out the hypocrisy and evil of slavery:

“I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be Equally Strong in the Breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs. Of this I am certain that it [slavery] is not founded upon that generous and christian principal of doing to others as we would that others should do unto us.” (1776)

She also wrote to him about women's voice in government:

“I long to hear that you have declared an independency. And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember,

all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.” (1776)

Her tone was lighthearted, but her letter is seen today as an early stride on the journey toward women's equality and suffrage.

### Suffrage at the Founding

At the time of independence, all the colonies but one limited suffrage to white, Protestant, land-owning men. The Founding generation believed that men represented the entire family. Only landowners could vote because landowners were the most invested in the community. Those who owned land worked for themselves—which means their vote was less likely to be influenced by a wealthier man. And since the general belief was that the woman's political identity was covered by her husband's, it wasn't necessary—nor, the argument went, did it make sense—for women to vote.

As Abigail Adams demonstrated in her 1776 correspondence with her husband, not everyone agreed with these social and political restrictions. Further, Abigail Adams, like other influential writers of the time, addressed the superficial education opportunities for girls. Judith Sargent Murray wrote of the injustice in assumptions about education for boys and girls in 1779 (published 1790)

“The one is taught to aspire, and the other is early confined and limited. As their years increase, the sister must be wholly domesticated, while the brother is led by the hand through all the flowery paths of science.”

Founder Benjamin Rush, recognizing the power that women exercised in the home, wrote in 1787,

“The equal share that every citizen has in the liberty, and the equal share he may have in the government of our country, make it necessary that our ladies should be qualified to a certain degree by a peculiar and suitable education, to concur in instructing their sons in the principles of liberty and government.”

Under the new Constitution in 1789, states maintained their power to set voting qualifications, and most kept property requirements in place. Because land was relatively inexpensive, historians estimate that 75% of white men were eligible to vote. This amounted, however, to less than 20% of the total population.

The outlier for this period, the only place in the world where some women could vote, was New Jersey. That colony’s constitution (1776) read: “all inhabitants of this colony, of full age, who are worth fifty pounds...and have resided in the county, in which they claim a vote for twelve months...shall be entitled to vote.” And some New Jersey women did vote. However, the practice was short-lived: the state amended its constitution in 1807, limiting suffrage to men. Historians note that the change was not motivated by the desire to deny women equality, but by party politics: Federalists pushed to disenfranchise women because females tended to vote Democratic-Republican.

## Equality and Suffrage

However, suffrage itself soon became the subject of a growing conversation regarding the position of women in a free society. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792), British philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft argued that a society that kept women “from a participation of the natural rights of mankind” was immoral, and she expressed the connection between voting and those natural rights. Wollstonecraft’s work was influential beyond England and inspired many other advocates for women’s equality.

Judith Sargent Murray was influenced by Wollstonecraft’s work, and was among the first to argue that men and women were equal in every way.

In her essay “On the Equality of the Sexes” in 1790 she argued that men and women were naturally equal, but women were disadvantaged by their need to focus their energies on domestic tasks, which Murray viewed as less creative and fulfilling.

The political, social, and economic status of women in society affected their access to suffrage. Since a married woman was considered to be represented by her husband, she did not need to vote. Voting was limited to those men who had a financial stake in a community, and a married woman could not own property. But despite these restrictions, it is clear that women neither viewed nor conducted themselves as non-entities. They exercised their responsibilities of citizenship by raising future citizens of a republic and through their powers of persuasion—private and public.

REFLECTION AND ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

- 1. The ideal of Republican Motherhood reveals a cultural awareness of the difference between what it means to be a citizen in a republic versus a subject in a monarchy. Describe those differences.
- 2. What was the legal doctrine of coverture?
- 3. Summarize the ways each of the women described in this essay participated in public life. Other than overlapping life timelines, what, if anything, did they have in common?
- 4. How free were women in this social system?
- 5. How did each woman’s legal status affect her ability to participate in public life? Her ability to impact society?
- 6. Choose one of Abigail Adams’s letters quoted in this essay and write a brief reflection explaining how it touches on principles of liberty, equality, and/or republican government.
- 7. Use the **Principles and Virtues Glossary** as needed to give examples of ways in which people involved in the debate over women’s equality demonstrated any three of the constitutional principles and any three of the civic virtues listed below.
  - **Principles:** equality, republican/representative government, popular sovereignty, federalism, inalienable rights
  - **Virtues:** perseverance, contribution, moderation, resourcefulness, courage, respect, justice.

Principle	Example & Explanation

Virtue	Example & Explanation

### A Pathway for Change





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