



## ***Petticoats vs. Redcoats: New Jersey Women and the American Revolution***

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**Central issue, problem, or question:** How did the American Revolution affect women's lives? What new ideas emerged from the revolution about women's roles as patriots and as citizens?

**Significance:** Although excluded from fighting, women who supported the revolutionary cause were active participants in the American Revolution. This lesson examines women's wartime actions and the development of a new ideal of patriotic womanhood in the aftermath of war.

**New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards for Social Studies:**  
**Standard 6.4** (United States and New Jersey History). **Middle School: E-4** (Explain New Jersey's critical role in the Revolution). **High School: E-2** (Analyze the social and economic impact of the Revolutionary War); **E-5** (Analyze New Jersey's role in the American Revolution).

**Objectives:** Based on their analyses of primary source documents, students will be able to identify and analyze the roles play by New Jersey women during the Revolutionary War by:

- Listing the ways in which women aided the war effort.
- Examining how these wartime roles contributed to changes in how American women viewed themselves and were viewed by their male compatriots.
- Analyzing ideas about women's roles within the new republic that grew out of the revolutionary experience.

**Duration:** Two 45-minute class periods.

**Abstract:** After learning about New Jersey women's contributions to the war effort and analyzing primary sources, middle school students will describe what women did and did not do during the American Revolution. They will also create a poem, fictional journal entry, or poster demonstrating what they learned. High school students will evaluate women's contributions to the American Revolution and analyze the emergence of a new ideal of republican womanhood.

## Sources

### *Secondary Sources*

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Ann Pfau online lecture: "Patriotism, Poetry, and National Politics: Women and the Revolution in New Jersey," July 2003; available on the New Jersey History Partnership Project website, <http://nj-history.org>, in the "Women" section.

Joan N. Burstyn et al, ed., *Past and Promise: Lives of New Jersey Women* (Syracuse, 1997).

Linda Grant DePauw, *Fortunes of War: New Jersey Women and the American Revolution*, New Jersey's Revolutionary Experience 26 (Trenton, 1975).

<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/women/secondarySources/Women.pdf>

Linda K. Kerber, "'History Can Do It No Justice': Women and the Reinterpretation of the American Revolution" in Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds. *Women in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville, 1989), 3-42.

Women's Project of New Jersey, New Jersey Women's History website, <http://www.scc.rutgers.edu/njwomenshistory/>

Carla Mulford, ed. Only for the Eye of a Friend: The Poems of Annis Boudinot Stockton (Charlottesville, 1995).

H. O. H. Vernon-Jackson, "A Loyalist's Wife: Letter of Mrs. Philip Van Courtlandt, December 1776 to February 1777," *History Today* 14 (August 1964): 574-80.

### *Primary Sources*

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"Belinda" (pseud. William Livingston) to *New Jersey Gazette*, 6 May 1778. <http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/women/documents/womenDoc1.pdf>

Article in the *Pennsylvania Journal; and the Weekly Advertiser*, 2 April 1777.

<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/women/documents/womenDoc2.pdf>

William Barton letter, 17 November 1778.  
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/women/documents/womenDoc3.pdf>

Announcement by the Ladies of Trenton, *New-Jersey Gazette*, 12 July 1780.  
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/women/documents/womenDoc4.pdf>

"The Sentiments of a Lady in New-Jersey," *New-Jersey Gazette*, 12 July 1780.  
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/women/documents/womenDoc5.pdf>

George Washington to Annis Boudinot Stockton, 31 August 1788.  
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/women/documents/womenDoc6.pdf>

Annis Boudinot Stockton to Julia Stockton Rush, 22 March 1792.  
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/women/documents/womenDoc7.pdf>

**Materials:** Teachers will require copies of the primary source documents listed above.

**Background:** Women were active participants in the American Revolution. Like men, they signed non-importation agreements during the colonial crises of the 1760s and 1770s, and by participating in spinning bees to produce thread for homespun cloth, they turned a domestic task into a public and patriotic act. Although excluded from fighting, some female colonists—like European women before them—contributed to the war as camp followers who cooked, nursed the wounded, and laundered dirty uniforms for the British and rebel armies. More common than camp followers were supportive wives who remained at home but shared their husbands' political commitments. These women often took care of family farms and businesses in the absence of soldier or politician husbands and were likely to suffer for their political allegiances if discovered by the opposing army. Some ardent supporters of the revolution even founded organizations that collected money to help clothe Washington's soldiers.

Although this lesson focuses on the revolutionaries, many New Jersey women were neutral or remained loyal to the Crown. Margaret Morris, for example, was a widow living in Burlington when the war broke out. Although she was a Quaker committed to political neutrality, she hid a prominent loyalist from armed men looking for Tories. A skilled healer, Morris later helped care for sick and wounded rebel soldiers. Catharine Van Courtlandt, the wife of a prominent New Jersey landowner and loyalist Philip Van Courtlandt, remained in New Jersey

with her children after her husband fled to New York. It was she, rather than her husband, who faced down the rebel officers who arrived at their estate with orders to arrest Philip.

New Jersey women's wartime experiences were similar to women's experiences in other states but for one crucial difference. New Jersey women who owned sufficient property (only widows or spinsters could own separate property under the common law principle of coverture) were empowered to vote by the state's 1776 constitution. However, this provision of the constitution was overturned in 1807 when the New Jersey legislature voted to disfranchise women and African Americans.

Despite the failure of this early experiment in woman suffrage, women (especially elite women) gained new status in the young republic by virtue of their support for the American Revolution. New Jersey's own Annis Stockton exemplifies this new feminine ideal, identified by Linda K. Kerber and other historians. The republican woman celebrated the nation's accomplishments and sought to instill patriotic virtues in her children, husband, and fellow citizens; she achieved her goals not by voting but rather by influencing those around her. An intimate of local and national political leaders and a recognized poet, Stockton did not hesitate to publicize her political beliefs, but although enfranchised by the state's 1776 constitution, she probably never voted.

**Key Words:**

Coverture

Camp follower

Non-importation agreement

Spinning bee

## Middle School Procedures

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The teacher should begin this lesson with a short lecture on New Jersey women's participation in the American Revolution (based on Linda Grant DePauw's pamphlet and Ann Pfau's online lecture, both available on the New Jersey History Partnership Project website, <http://nj-history.org>, in the "Women" section).

Then the teacher will ask students to describe the ways women's roles changed throughout the history they have studied. The teacher will list these changing roles on the chalkboard or Smart Board.

In preparation for work in cooperative groups, the teacher will hand out copies of Governor William Livingston's 1778 article of advice to women written under the pseudonym, "Belinda,"

<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/women/documents/womenDoc1.pdf>

Students will read this document as a class (with help from the teacher to understand eighteenth-century meanings and historical references); afterwards, the teacher will model the activity of analyzing primary source documents by asking the students a series of questions:

- Who was William Livingston? Why did he write under a woman's name?
- What is the tone of this document?
- What sort of advice did "Belinda" give women?
- Do you think women followed this advice?
- What does this document tell us about the attempts of political leaders to enlist both men and women in their cause?
- What does this document tell us about women and the American Revolution?

The teacher will then assign the students to cooperative learning groups of 3 students. Each group will be given two or three primary source documents to analyze:

- Article in the *Pennsylvania Journal*.  
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/women/documents/womenDoc2.pdf>
- William Barton letter.  
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/women/documents/womenDoc3.pdf>
- Announcement by the Ladies of Trenton.  
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/women/documents/womenDoc4.pdf>

Students will ask questions of these documents similar to the ones their teacher posed. Each member will be assigned one of the following roles: one should moderate of the group's discussion; another should record the group's decisions; the third student should be responsible for reading the document aloud and identifying key passages. Each group will be responsible for listing the ways women did and did not contribute to the revolution in America; each item on the list should be supported by evidence (a direct quote) from one of the documents. Each group will present their findings to the class.

Based on their work in small groups, students will create individual projects, for example, a poem or journal entry from the perspective of a fictional woman who supported the revolutionary cause during the American Revolution. Alternately, students might create posters depicting women engaged in a variety of war-related activities to illustrate how women participated in the events of the American Revolution.

## High School Procedures / Activities

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This lesson will begin with a short lecture (based on Linda Grant DePauw's pamphlet and Ann Pfau's online lecture) focusing on women and the American Revolution. The pamphlet and lecture are both available on the New Jersey History Partnership Project website, <http://nj-history.org>, in the "Women" section.

The teacher will then divide the class into cooperative groups of 3-4 students; each group will include a recorder, a facilitator, a speaker, and possibly a reader. Students will read and analyze the following primary source documents:

- Article in the *Pennsylvania Journal*.  
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/women/documents/womenDoc2.pdf>
- William Barton letter.  
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/women/documents/womenDoc3.pdf>
- Announcement by the Ladies of Trenton.  
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/women/documents/womenDoc4.pdf>
- Sentiments of a Lady in New Jersey.  
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/women/documents/womenDoc5.pdf>

The students will then identify and categorize the ways women contributed to the revolutionary cause—as propagandists, as workers, etc. They will report their findings to the class. The larger class will then discuss the importance of these efforts: Did American women make significant contributions to the revolutionary cause?

Following this discussion, the teacher will explain that women's participation in the American Revolution opened new opportunities for some women and helped create a new feminine ideal. Students will read:

- George Washington to Annis Boudinot Stockton.  
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/women/documents/womenDoc6.pdf>
- Annis Boudinot Stockton to Julia Stockton Rush.  
<http://nj-history.org/americanRevolution/women/documents/womenDoc7.pdf>

Based on these primary source documents, students will write a letter to the editor of the *New-Jersey Gazette* evaluating women's contributions to the American Revolution and explaining what roles women should play within the new republic. As they write their letters, students should bear in mind that although women like Annis Stockton believed men and women were spiritual and intellectual equals, they did not believe that both sexes should perform the same role in society. Students will share their letters with the class. Teachers should

encourage students to compare and contrast early notions of women's roles to current practices but should also explain that these early opportunities would allow a later generation of women to demand marital reform, voting rights, and employment opportunities.

**Connections:** This lesson might be part of a larger lesson on women's changing roles in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries. High school teachers might also wish to use this material to talk about the creation of a new national culture and manners in the aftermath of the American Revolution.

**Comments and Suggestions:** Teachers should tailor the number and difficulty of primary sources used in this lesson to the abilities of their students. To make sure students working in small groups keep on task, the teacher should serve as a facilitator and coach, checking students' work at regular intervals but encouraging students to complete the lesson on their own.

**Instructional Technology:** Teachers and student presenters might wish to use an overhead project or SMART board. Advanced students may search for additional sources either online or in print to serve as background information and to further assist them in drafting their letters. Students should be encouraged to use printed sources available in their school library and local libraries or historical societies.