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### Wives after The Revolution: The Backbone of the Republic

The American Revolution brought major changes to every aspect of life for Americans in the late eighteenth century. Every effort from every citizen was now meant to further the republic of the United States of America. Prior to the Revolution women were valued solely as wives and mothers to take care of children, households, and husbands. Women of the newly free America still served the same roles as mothers, wives, sisters and daughters but the very thought of freedom changed how they were to carry out those roles. Women did not get a brand new role in light of the Revolution, but rather the role they had always served was revised through their relationships with their husbands, children, and even in society. In this paper I am going to argue that American independence from Britain did not change the roles of wives but it did change their motivation for completing their duties as wives and mothers due to emerging republican ideology and it became more important to their personal happiness, however, it did not satisfy all wives.

The principle motivation behind the duty of a wife after the Revolutionary War, in America, was to help further the new republic. Before marriage women had the same roles, minus that of being the mistress of a household. As the mistress she was responsible for “running the household, bearing and caring for children, and nursing the sick”.<sup>1</sup> These roles were true for wives before and after the war, but after their reasoning behind them had completely changed.

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<sup>1</sup> Merrill D. Smith, *Women's Roles in Eighteenth Century America*, (California: Greenwood, 2010) 1.

Since the new nation was flying high on its intense sense of patriotism and loyalty to the republic, it is no doubt that wives would take part in these beliefs as well. Wives had always been seen as a husband's best friends but after the war the knowledge and values of wives became more valuable to their husbands. John Adams, the second president of the United States, frequently wrote to his wife, Abigail, for advice and guidance. He often addressed his letters to her "my dearest friend".<sup>2</sup> Women, such as Abigail Adams, were raised to care for their husbands with the republican virtue in mind. That virtue was that no matter what they did, it was done to further the cause of freedom and liberty. Women were there to comfort, support and advise their husbands to always do the right thing for the nation. A wife was expected to create a happy, loving environment for her family to live in or it would cause "her husband [to be] a monster indeed if not happy at home".<sup>3</sup> Since women were still not equal to men, their part of the revolution (and continuing the effort) was to be the encouragement and mind shaper of the men, who would be the primary formers of the new government. Managing their households was also an act of patriotism for women. A productive and aspirational American household was thought to be a helping factor in making the model post-revolutionary man. The beliefs of the American people, in the late eighteenth century, were that if a man's home life was completely in order then he could fulfill his expected role in the republic, and that was the duty of a wife. Wives managed servants and even performed the household chores themselves, in the spirit of the republic. Wives also furthered the cause of the Revolution in their children. Raising the child had always been the primary job of the woman, but after the war it was seen as another form of female contribution to the new nation. If a wife raised her children to be respectable and carry on

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<sup>2</sup> John Adams to Abigail Adams, December 23, 1782.

<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17821223aa>

<sup>3</sup> *Female Characters: The Domestic and The Gadder*, (Free-Masons Magazine, July 1, 1795), 46, accessed April 26, 2016, Ebscohost.

the ideals of the revolution, then she was contributing to the success of the country. The goal was to raise girls to be the kinds of mothers and wives they were (supportive, nurturing, and dedicated to their families). For their sons, the goal was to raise strong independent men who were dedicated to the republic. To prove that women were doing their duty to the nation it would be evident that their “children are cleanly, well-bred, and engaging”.<sup>4</sup> All citizens recognized the fact that the future of the nation they had worked so hard to free, would be in the hands of the children one day, so the mothers/wives made it a priority to raise them with the republican values that dominated the late eighteenth century.

Not only was it important for wives to embody the republican movement to motivate and support their husbands but also because the partnership of marriage was the role model for all other relationships after the Revolution. Marriage itself was the “social union... loving partnership of man and wife in opposition to patriarchal dominion as the republican model for social and political relationships”.<sup>5</sup> The republic itself was a marriage between the people and the country. Republicanism was based on “virtue, the self-sacrificial and disinterested quality” that was expected to be found in marriages, even before the Revolution.<sup>6</sup> It was important for the wife, after the Revolution, to devote the self-sacrificial attitude in her marriage to show how the citizens of the country should act in their new republic. The wife and the people were there to support and better the republican efforts of the country. Before the Revolution it was desired that a wife be very modest and normal. They were supposed to be “a good person, but not perfectly beautiful”, or in other words, very mediocre.<sup>7</sup> However, after independence and the highlighted

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<sup>4</sup> *Female Characters*, 46.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Lewis, *The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic*, (Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, October 1987) 689, accessed April 27, 2016, Ebscohost.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis, *The Republican Wife*, 690.

<sup>7</sup> *The Mental and Personal Qualifications of a Wife*, (Edinburgh Magazine, February 1, 1761) 92, accessed April 27, 2016, Ebscohost.

focus on what the republic needed to succeed, wives were valued to be more knowledgeable. Instead of being “an acquaintance with domestic news, but no acquaintance with foreign”, it was preferred for women to know a little more about the rest of the world because of the metaphor of marriage and the republic.<sup>8</sup>

Other than the extreme spirit of patriotism that accompanied post-Revolutionary America, wives were further motivated to be the classic eighteenth century wife for the sake of their own happiness. It was a common belief at the time, that women would not be happy unless they married and established a family and household. An article that came out in 1795 in the Free-Mason Magazine compares the happiness of a married women with a family to the happiness of an unmarried, unestablished women. The article, titled *The Female Character: The Domestic and The Gadder*, made it clear that the ethos of the time was: domestication was the key to a happy life. Another article stated that “sicknes, misfortunes, or secular strife, Can never disturb her, if she is a wife”.<sup>9</sup> The life goal of a woman was to be married and start a family, which was extremely evident in an article published by the Hibernian Magazine in 1777. The article was from one woman to another in regards to marriage. The woman who wrote the article was married and told the newlywed (and any other girls in that situation, since it was published work) that she had been “sway’d by reason’s sacred voice, [to] make the humane philosopher your choice”.<sup>10</sup> America made it appealing to be married and once married, wives had no choice but to perform their household and family duties to fulfill that dream they had been sold and keep up a decent reputation. If they did not live up to their domestic expectations it would

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<sup>8</sup> *The Mental and Personal Qualifications of a Wife*, 92.

<sup>9</sup> “The Happy Wife”, *Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure*, November 1, 1775, 266-2660. Accessed on April 26, 2016. Ebscohost.

<sup>10</sup> “To a Young LADY, on Her Marriage”, *Hibernian Magazine*. December 1, 1777. 823-8230. Accessed on April 26, 2016, Ebscohost.

provide a miserable living environment for not only themselves, but the rest of their family since they were the staple of their households. If women did not get married they would have to work as maids or other helpers, so the option of marriage was clearly more desired. Every girl knew their destiny was to be married as proven in the article, *The Choice*, where a woman wrote that it had and always will be her “fate to enter the connubial state”.<sup>11</sup> This quote shows how women, whether they wanted it or not, were destined to be married and in turn would be the happiest they could possibly be. From the beginning of time, it had been that way, but the Revolutionary War provided intensification in those beliefs because life had all of the sudden developed a new meaning. The new meaning was the republic. Every citizen was living for the republic since the start of the war.

While the late eighteenth century wife was expected to be a role model republican wife, not all women were satisfied with their roles. The majority of women were perfectly satisfied in serving the republic from behind the scenes, but there were also those that were not. In 1790, Judith Sargent Murray used the pen name Constantia, to voice her opinion of the traditional role of the wife in the *Massachusetts Magazine*. She made the claim that “the minds are not alike, full well I know”<sup>12</sup> and the reasons they were not alike came down to things such as women’s interest in fashion and slander. She then argued that while those things proved that women had better imaginations than men. She did the same with reason, memory and judgment. Women simply were not happy being left at home creating the republican environment for their husbands and then not getting to participate in anything directly outside the house. She continued to argue that women could contribute as much as a man could to the republic if she was given the same

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<sup>11</sup> *The Choice. Or the Model of a Wife*, (The American Magazine and Historical Chronicle, July 1, 1746) 328, access April 27, 2016, Ebscohost.

<sup>12</sup> Judith Sargent Murray, *On the Equality of the Sexes*, (Massachusetts Magazine, March/April 1790; Judith Sargent Murray Society, 2008), accessed April 27, 2016. [http://jsmsociety.com/On\\_the\\_Equality.html](http://jsmsociety.com/On_the_Equality.html)

opportunities and advantages. She claimed that the difference between minds came from “the difference of education, and continued advantages”.<sup>13</sup> While girls were raised to think that being a republican wife and mother were the most fulfilling and happiest lifestyles, they would become them and realize there was a void or something missing from their lives. Without being able to learn and have an actual education “she herself is most unhappy; she feels the want of a cultivated mind.”<sup>14</sup> Men argued that women could never be happy without being a wife in articles such as *Female Characters: The Domestic and The Gadder*. The article argues that if a woman is not domesticated she will live a miserable life “by neglect [making] every thing always anxious and fretful”.<sup>15</sup> With the mentality that the country was in after the Revolutionary War, women had no choice but to play the republican wife/mother role they had heard so many wonderful things about. To defy that role too much could have been seen as acts against the republic, which after a war dedicated to that cause, would be devastating.

While all parts of late eighteenth century Americans lives changed in almost every way. Women were at the heart of that change, however, their roles saw little change. Their roles stayed the same in being a mother and a wife who takes care of her husband, children, and household but they now did it for different, more important reasons. Their relationships and motivation for their roles changed because of the Revolutions spirit of republicanism. Wives were now seen as the caretakers of the men and future men of the republic. They had to instill the ideology of the Revolution in children, encourage men to always act in furthering the republic, and they also needed to ensure their own happiness. While being the eighteenth century equivalent of a trophy wife was the goal for most young women in post-Revolutionary America,

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<sup>13</sup> Sargent Murray, *On the Equality of the Sexes*.

<sup>14</sup> Sargent Murray, *On the Equality of the Sexes*.

<sup>15</sup> *Female Characters*, 46.

it did not satisfy all of them and led to some protests in newspapers. As the work of women go largely unnoticed because they stayed at home, I believe that they were the true backbone of the republic.

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