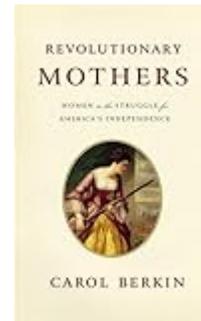




Carol Berkin. *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005. xviii + 194 pp. \$24.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4000-4163-3.



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Our Founding Mothers and War

In today's headlines and in the H-Minerva discussions, we have focused on the mothers camped in Texas denouncing the war in Iraq and demanding that our service men and women return home. This discussion has also raised questions about the complexity and variety of roles that mothers have played during various U.S. wars. Carol Berkin's newest book is timely and provides readers with a detailed account of women's participation in the first major U.S. war, the American Revolution.

Berkin is not the first historian author to probe women's roles during the American Revolution. In 1975, Linda Grant DePauw in *Founding Mothers* wrote a brief popular overview on this subject for the next year's bicentennial. In 1980, two major monographs by Linda Kerber and Mary Beth Norton explored the intellectual background of the concept of Republican Motherhood and its social and cultural roots.[1] Still more recently, Mary Beth Norton in *Founding Mothers & Fathers* (1996) examined the concept of citizenship, while Berkin in *First Generations* (1996) further explored gender roles. In 2004 journalist Cokie Roberts in *Founding Mothers* focused on elite white women.

Berkin builds on this rich historiography with her own fresh reading of published sources to graphically portray the multiple roles women played as Loyalists or Patriots, elite women such as the wives of generals, and ordinary women such as camp followers. Berkin delineates the differences among white, black, and Native American experiences. The result is a gendered portrait of multiple revolutions.

Berkin's book is divided topically into ten chapters, all of which are titled by apt quotes and adorned with fitting illustrations. She argues that during the American Revolution, women were not "passive observers" but rather "partners" with their husbands, brothers, fathers and sons (p. xv). She makes clear that men and women had different experiences throughout the eight years of the bloody war and that women's homefront experiences were shaped by race and class as well as by gender.

Patriot women allied with their husbands to organize the first effective boycotts. "Thus the first political act of American women was to say, 'No'" (p. 13). Mercy Otis Warren, Abigail Adams, Deborah Franklin, Lucy Knox,

Catherine Greene, and Martha Washington's roles are clearly explained. Whether they urged their family men to fight or not, women soon found themselves in charge of the economics of the household they had to manage until their husbands returned. Some women who were poverty stricken or fearful of attack decided that it was better to follow their husbands' military units than to remain at home. As camp followers they did the cooking and cleaning for the military and were paid modest wages for their efforts. Generals viewed most "camp followers" as little more than necessary nuisances, save for the wives of senior officers whose main role was to maintain social status and morale. A handful of women such as Deborah Sampson disguised themselves as men and fought until discovered—often not until they were injured. Still others such as Margaret Corbin, a "Molly Pitcher," helped with the water supply to cool the cannons, and might move into action if their husbands were disabled. Corbin was granted a pension after the war for the injuries she suffered.

Loyalist women often had to flee their land and head for the safety of Canada or England. Many were shocked to discover that their property, even their personal safety, was no longer secure and that their friendships would not help them if their husband was a Loyalist and the raiding party were Patriots. By the war's end, over fifty thousand had to make a new home in Canada.

Most Indians of the Iroquois Six Nations fought with the Loyalists because they believed that a British victory would most protect their lands and independence. In many tribes, the women had power through the matri-focal, matrilineal culture of their tribes. Women dominated agriculture, they could select the chief, or even vote in tribal meetings. Sir William Johnson and his wife Molly Brant tried to live in harmony with both the Native Americans and the colonists. They helped motivate the Native Americans to fight for the King. Other influential woman leaders included Nanyehi, or Queen Esther Montour.

Berkin believes that African-American women focused on freedom and tried to decide which side would

most advance their cause. This was not an effective strategy because neither King nor Congress treated them well, nor kept vague promises of freedom for support. Those who fled the country found racism followed them to Canada. The British finally issued certificates of manumission to a thousand former slaves for their part in supporting the Loyalist cause, but some would later lose their freedom again. Few blacks fared well during or after the war.

Berkin's chapter on female couriers, saboteurs, and spies for both sides is especially fascinating. Deborah Champion carried dispatches; Sybil Ludington warned her countrymen in Danbury, Connecticut that the British were approaching. Berkin adds new detail using the memoirs of Lydia Darragh, Emily Geiger, Mammy Kate, and Martha Bratton.

The final chapter focuses on the post-war era. Berkin's description of the wish to "return to normalcy" reminds us of the 1920s or late 1940s. No longer were women considered "morally and mentally inferior to men" (p. 151). Their wartime efforts had demonstrated that they could think and make decisions and judgments. As a result, the seeds for a new role for women, Republican Motherhood, were planted during the war and began to grow and blossom in the postwar period. Institutions to educate women who would be vital companions to their husbands and ideal mothers to their children were soon founded. However, the revolution in gender roles was not complete. It would take other wars—the Civil War, World War I, World War II, Vietnam, and Iraq—and women's essential participation in them before other rights and responsibilities would be bestowed on women. Indeed, even today, the revolution is not complete.

Note

[1]. Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women 1750-1800* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1980).

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