Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic (Early American Studies)

Rosemarie Zagarri
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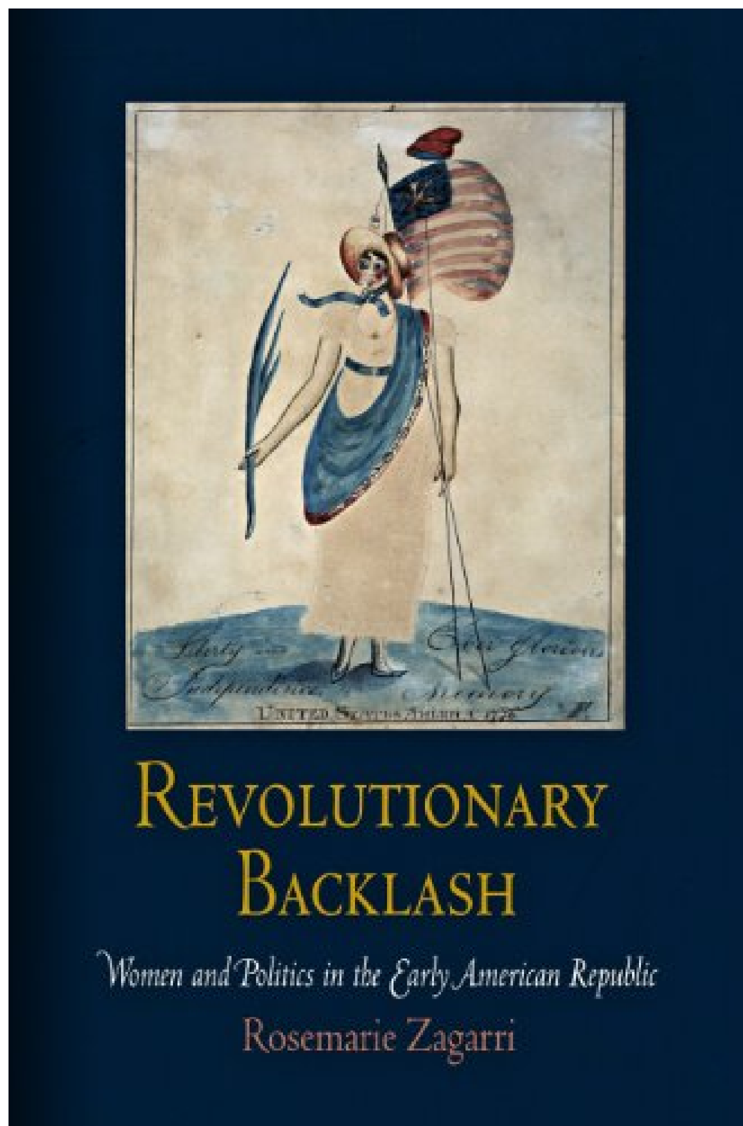

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Rosemarie Zagarri : Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic (Early American Studies) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic (Early American Studies):

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RDDRosemarie Zagarris Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic examines womens role in politics during the first fifty years of the American Republic. Zagarri draws upon the fields of womens history and gender history as well as legal history in her analysis.Zagarri seeks to understand womens political involvement following the American Revolution and what led to their removal to separate spheres. Additionally, Zagarri wants to know what methods were used to define inclusion and exclusion in American politics.Zagarri argues that women were politically active following the American Revolution and that mens fears of their political activism led to the end of their overt role in traditional partisan politics. Following the American Revolution, many American women and men did understand the notion of womens rights in political terms. Women actively engaged in partisan politics and, through their very presence, women eased mens guilt about the ruptures caused by partisanship and provided a visible symbol of unity, linking the mythical patriotic consensus of the revolutionary era with a factionless era that lay in the (hopefully) not-too-distant future. Despite this hope, women played an active role in party conflict. Changing social mores, however, led to calls for women to act as mediators, calming partisan clashes. Zagarri claims that this eventually resulted in womens forced exit from party politics and the expectation that they would exercise their political role indirectly, a part of the discourse of separate spheres. According to Zagarri, the concept of separate spheres was not used to prevent womens political activity, rather, separate spheres ideologymay actually have been a reaction against womens more extensive involvement in politics, a convenient way to explain and justify excluding women from party politics and electoral activities. In the end, Zagarri argues that the triumph of the Republican party after the Federalists downfall left little room for womens political activism. The creation of a racial and gender-based hierarchy finally justified womens exclusion from American politics.Zagarri works within a framework developed by Joan Scott and Mary Kelley to broaden the definition of political actions. She argues against Mary Beth Norton and Linda K. Kerber to suggest that women voting in New Jersey were not outliers, but part of a larger pattern of womens political involvement in American society. In her epilogue, Zagarri builds upon the foundation of political historian Louis Hartz to suggest that white masculinity stood as a bulwark against the excesses of unfettered individualism and reinforced a hierarchical structure to American life.Zagarri uses traditional sources of male political history, including newspapers, legislative records, political pamphlets, and correspondence among political elites. She also expands her source base to include popular periodicals and ladies magazines; Fourth of July orations; fiction; satire; and the writings of women contained in letters to their husbands, friends, and relatives. This balance of sources enables Zagarri to contrast the role of women in politics as men understood it and as women themselves understood it.2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. BrilliantBy fanofhistoryThis is an excellent piece of historical scholarship. It's well-written and accessible (for upper-division undergrads on up), yet painstakingly research and full of nuanced arguments. More importantly, and unlike so many other similar books, it does not separate women's history from the mainstream into its own quaint narrative. Rather the author interjects the experiences and roles of women into the mainstream, revealing their roles and responses in American history. Well worth the effort of scholars and grad students to read, but also potentially useful in an advanced undergrad class.0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A Couple of Fair WarningsBy A CookI bought this book because I was looking for one that might have original source material on what women of the Revolutionary War Era actually said or wrote. I am still in the midst of reading it, and while there is a lot of narrative (as one might expect), it also has some material of the type for which I was looking. So, overall I am very happy with this title.The reason I am giving this title only 4 stars is that it is written largely in academia-speak. It is almost as if this were a thesis that might have been tweaked a bit for wider publication. Some academics are gifted in being able to write for the general public. Others are not, or just cannot be bothered. Where this author falls on that spectrum is difficult to say. But the book would have been better if it had been written with the general public in mind instead of seemingly largely for fellow academics. If you don't mind reading this style of writing, you will probably enjoy the book. But if that is not your preference or you have difficulty understanding such writing, then perhaps this book is not for you.The excellent part of this having such an academic flare is that the book is very well researched and amply noted with source material. So I will be able to find other sources for original material on this subject. Had the author been less academically inclined, so much rich source material might not have been provided. Thus, I am very grateful for her endeavor.Also, fair warning, it is from a highly feminist perspective. One could write about this topic easily without alienating a reader who is just not into the feminist movement. It is not particularly bothersome to me, but it might be to others--and they should be aware of the perspective from which it is written.

The Seneca Falls Convention is typically seen as the beginning of the first women's rights movement in the United States. Revolutionary Backlash argues otherwise. According to Rosemarie Zagarri, the debate over women's rights began not in the decades prior to 1848 but during the American Revolution itself. Integrating the approaches of women's historians and political historians, this book explores changes in women's status that occurred from the time of the American Revolution until the election of Andrew Jackson.Although the period after the Revolution produced no collective movement for women's rights, women built on precedents established during the Revolution and gained an informal foothold in party politics and male electoral activities. Federalists and Jeffersonians vied for women's

allegiance and sought their support in times of national crisis. Women, in turn, attended rallies, organized political activities, and voiced their opinions on the issues of the day. After the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, a widespread debate about the nature of women's rights ensued. The state of New Jersey attempted a bold experiment: for a brief time, women there voted on the same terms as men.Yet as Rosemarie Zagarri argues in Revolutionary Backlash, this opening for women soon closed. By 1828, women's politicization was seen more as a liability than as a strength, contributing to a divisive political climate that repeatedly brought the country to the brink of civil war. The increasing sophistication of party organizations and triumph of universal suffrage for white males marginalized those who could not vote, especially women. Yet all was not lost. Women had already begun to participate in charitable movements, benevolent societies, and social reform organizations. Through these organizations, women found another way to practice politics.

"Widely researched, gracefully written, and nicely illustrated. . . . A welcome corrective to both the usual women's history (without politics) and traditional political history (without women)."North Carolina Historical "This book makes a significant contribution to the literature of American women's history by defining a period that has received too little attention. The writing is gorgeous. The research is first-rate."Edith B. Gelles, author of Abigail Adams: A Writing Life"An engaging book that successfully marries political practice and political theory with gender ideology. It is also a persuasive book. . . . What makes [Zagarri's] study compelling is the pervasive presence of women; we hear their voices as they communicate privately in letters and as they argue publicly for rights. Visual evidences let us see them at political gatherings."American Historical "'Pathbreaking' is an appellation reserved for few books; 'field-changing' is an even rarer designation. Nonetheless Rosemarie Zagarri's Revolutionary Backlash deserves both. She transforms the field of women's history and the standard political narrative that still dominates United States history."William Mary QuarterlyAbout the AuthorRosemarie Zagarri is Professor of History at George Mason University.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.IntroductionMore than three decades after the American Revolution ended, a Maryland newspaper published an article with the reassuring headline "Revolutions Never Go Backward." Expressing the hope that the world had "wearied" of revolutions, the author maintained that people throughout the world were now ready to "settle down in quiet for the purpose of enjoying what little good there may be mingled with the evil in this naughty world." Yet if American women and men felt that the gains of their political Revolution had been secured, its effects on women were less certain. In the immediate wake of the Revolution, women's prospects seemed promising. Writing in 1798, Massachusetts author Judith Sargent Murray congratulated her "fair country-women" on what she called "the happy revolution which the few past years has made in their favour." At long last, she said, "'the Rights of Women' begin to be understood; we seem, at length, determined to do justice" to women. Such was her "confidence" that she expected even more changes to be forthcoming. "Our young women," Murray declared, are "forming a new era in female history."Just a few years later, however, the effects of the French Revolution and the upheavals of domestic political strife seemed to be taking a toll. A male writer viewed the situation, particularly with respect to women, with alarm. "That revolutionary mania," he maintained, "which of late has so forcibly extended its deleterious effects to almost every subject" had infected women as well. "Blind to the happiness of their present situation and seized with a revolutionary phrenzy, women feel themselves highly wronged and oppressed. . . . They seem ardently to wish for a revolution in their present situation." Yet both the threat and the promise of a new era for women seem to have come quickly to an end. In 1832, historian Hannah Adams observed, "We hear no longer of the alarming, and perhaps justly obnoxious din, of the 'rights of women.' Whatever [women's] capacity of receiving instruction may be, there can be no use in extending it beyond the sphere of their duties." Why had just a few short decades produced such a changed perception of women's rights, roles, and responsibilities?This is a book about the transformation of American politics from the American Revolution to the election of Andrew Jackson. It is not the typical story of the rise of democracy and the emergence of the common man. It is a tale about how the Revolution profoundly changed the popular understanding of women's political status and initiated a widespread, ongoing debate over the meaning of women's rights. It shows how the Revolution created new opportunities for women to participate, at least informally, in party and electoral politics and how these activities continued into the era of the Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans. Yet this opening for women soon closed. By 1830, a conservative backlash had set in. The recognition of women's political potential, as much as actual changes in their role, unleashed this reaction. At the same time, the broadening of political opportunities for white males, especially the growth of political parties and the expansion of the franchise, diminished the importance of non-voters, including women, in the electoral process and led to an increasing focus on a more restricted group, white male electors. The era of democratization for men thus produced a narrowing of political possibilities for women.For a long time, it was assumed that the American Revolution did not create a corresponding revolution for women. Because the new nation did not grant women political rights, their status was thought to have changed little. The path-breaking works of Linda Kerber and Mary Beth Norton, published in 1980, demolished this belief. By expanding the definition of "politics" beyond the formal realm of voting and holding public office, it became apparent that women had indeed been active participants in the nation's formative event, the American Revolution. Women talked, wrote, thought about

political ideas and expressed their sentiments in political action. Through the making and wearing of homespun, their participation in economic boycotts, and their sacrifices made in the course of the war itself, women contributed to the success of the revolutionary cause. In the process, they also became politically aware and engaged. During and after the war, men not only acknowledged women's political role, they encouraged and praised their contributions.Historians such Catherine Allgor, Susan Branson, Cynthia Kierner, Jan Lewis, Simon Newman, and David Waldstreicher have more recently demonstrated the continuation of women's political involvement during the first years of the new republic. Borrowing from the social sciences, they define politics to include not only the formal institutions of government but also a wide variety of informal norms, symbolic actions, and everyday behaviors. In addition to studying the behavior of women themselves, they also examine assumptions about gender roles and the power relations between the sexes. This approach expands the possibilities for understanding the extent to which political institutions either reflect, reinforce, or subvert the existing gender hierarchy. What these historians have found is that even as conflict between Federalists and Democratic- Republicans was transforming the country's political landscape, women embraced a political role for themselves. They read and wrote about political matters. They attended party functions and supported partisan causes. Through their social networks, they established bonds that spread political gossip, advanced men's careers, and facilitated patronage appointments. The wheels of government would have turned less effectively without their presence.There has nonetheless been some resistance to this approach among historians of the early American republic. Despite important exceptions, political historians and women's historians sometimes still write as if the two fields shared no common ground. Traditional political historians portray women as peripheral to the central political events of the time, excusing themselves from taking women seriously because of their lack of formal political rights. Their focus remains on the great white men who shaped national politics and policiesthe presidencies of larger than life figures such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson; the conflict between intellectual titans such as James Madison and Alexander Hamilton; the idiosyncrasies of a John Adams or Aaron Burr. When they broaden the scope of discussion to include the middling or lower classes, the focus of the story, as in Sean Wilentz's The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln (2005), often returns to white males. If they do mention women, they tend to do so in a separate discussion, parallel to the main political narrative.Early American women's historians, on the other hand, often depict developments in male politics as tangential to women's lives. Some inveigh against privileging white male politics. Others want to scrap the political narrative altogether, seeking instead to recover the substance of women's daily lives and allow women to speak in their own voices. By studying women of all social classes and races, their work has fruitfully revealed, among other things, a thriving female domestic economy, sophisticated social reform movements, and diverse notions of womanhood in the early republic. Yet minimizing the importance of women's relationship to the state has a cost. The period between the American Revolution and the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 appears to be nothing more than a frustrating hiatus in the development of women's rights. Important changes in the popular discourse about women's rights have been overlooked or ignored.This study, then, operates at the intersection of political history, women's history, and gender history. The long-term origins begin in the late seventeenth century, when thinkers such as Francois Poulain de la Barre, John Locke, Mary Astell, and others began to challenge the notion of women's inherent intellectual inferiority. Enlightenment philosophes in eighteenth-century England, Scotland, and France promoted a theory of historical changed that placed women at the center social progress. The authors of the earliest women's histories produced works that recounted women's literary, philosophical, and political achievements in past times and far-flung places throughout the world. All of these developments challenged the notion that women were inherently inferior to men. Their abilities were limited not by their innate feminine characteristics but by society's customs, habits, and traditions. Under the right circumstances and with the proper education, women, it seemed, might well equal men in a wide range of arenas that had been closed to them.The American Revolution accelerated this reevaluation of women's role and gave it a specifically political valence. By celebrating the principles of equality and natural rights, the Revolution established universal ideals as the benchmark by which American society would subsequently judge the fairness and equity of its policies. Although not initially intended to apply to women, these ideals were not, in theory, limited to any particular nation, group, race, or sex; they extended to all people. Americans soon had to decide whether they meant what they said. In many ways, the story of post-revolutionary America is the story of how American women and men sought to defineand ultimately to limit and restrictthe expansive ideals that they had so successfully deployed against Britain. Without fully realizing it, American revolutionaries had opened up a Pandora's box whose consequences they only dimly understood.For a few brief decades, significant changes in women's status appeared possible. People at this time had a capacious understanding of the political realm. In a world in which much political activity of importance occurred out-of-doors and in-the-streets, there was a valued place for non-voters as well as voters, blacks as well as whites, and women as well as men. Building on the precedent set by the American Revolution, male politicians encouraged, and even welcomed, women's participation in party politics and electoral activities. In New Jersey, women actually gained a more formal role. Legislators in that state extended the principle linking taxation and representation to include women. Beginning in 1776, qualified women, usually wealthy widows, voted in both state and federal elections. Although the experiment ended in 1807, for a time the unimaginable had

become a reality. Women shared in the exactly the same political rights and privileges as men.The publication in 1792 of Mary Wollstonecraft's Vindication of the Rights of Woman transformed the terms of the debate over women, introducing the term "women's rights" into widespread popular usage. In periodicals, speeches, novels, and private letters, American men and women pondered, probed, and fought over what it meant for women to possess rights and whether those rights included voting and holding public office. Although socially and legally subordinate to men, white women, it became clear, enjoyed a privileged status. Unlike slaves or free blacks, white women were distinct individuals who shared certain rights in common with white men. Wollstonecraft's formulation also exposed a more troubling issue. A contradiction lay at the heart of the new republican experiment. How could American society reconcile its commitment to equality and natural rights with the exclusion of women from government and politics?It was both the promise and the threat of these possibilities that created controversy. In its less threatening form, it was clear that women might act politically in the role of what historians have called the "republican wife" or "republican mother." This notion, which first emerged during the American Revolution, carved out a new understanding of women's political status. In their role as wives and mothers, women had contributed to the success of the revolutionary cause; in the future, their contributions would help determine the success or failure of the new republic. It was now understood that without even leaving their traditional feminine roles, women would have a significant political role to play. Yet while acknowledging women's political contributions, this notion also limited the scope of their involvement. It did not expand women's role beyond that of wife and mother or highlight women's potential as independent political beings. Rather, women were supposed to affect politics and government indirectly, by means of their influence over their husbands and sons, rather than through their own agency.A highly visible, if relatively small, number of women, however, embraced their new political role a with vigor and assertiveness that impressed some people while it alarmed others. Women who were deeply interested in politics even gained their own designation: "female politicians." In contrast to "republican wives and mothers," female politicians saw themselvesand were often seen by othersas political actors in their own right. For supporters, women's intense politicization represented a means of extending the political opportunities opened up by the American Revolution. For detractors, such women violated the bounds of femininity, challenged male authority, and threatened to destroy essential differences between the sexes. Like Mary Wollstonecraft and the female voters of New Jersey, their "wild-eyed" independence threatened to overturn the entire social structure and gender hierarchy.Over time, women's increasing politicization, along with the threat posed by women's rights, produced a backlash. As party conflict between Federalists and Republicans intensified, women allied themselves with one party over the other and took sides in bitter partisan struggles. Party conflict began to threaten not only the country's political future but the social fabric itself. Families split apart, communities divided, the national repeatedly went to the brink of civil war. In this context, women's political participation took on a new and more ominous significance. Instead of serving the good of the entire nation, women now advanced the interests of a particular party. At a time when factionalism threatened to rend the nation in two, women were behaving as partisans, not patriots. In response, a new discourse emerged. Women, it was said, could best serve the nation not by engaging in politics but by withdrawing to the domestic realm. As wives and mothers, they could mitigate party passions by acting as mediators between warring male partisans and inculcate a spirit of openness to dissenting views in their husbands and children. If women removed themselves from party and electoral politics, it might be possible, then, for men to engage in party warfare without wrecking communities, destroying sociability, or undermining the stability of the republic. Women, moreover, would still have a political role to play. Just like the republican mothers of the American Revolution, they would exercise their political influence indirectly, by means of their husbands and sons, rather than in the more overt manner practiced by female politicians.By the time of Andrew Jackson's election of 1828, a combination of factors led to a further narrowing of possibilities for women in the realm of party and electoral politics. First were structural changes in American laws and institutions. Despite their claims to support the universal "rights of man," Republicans made it clear during debates over the expansion of the franchise that they did not include women in their demands. In fact, even as the Republicans became more successful in broadening the franchise for men, states increasingly began to exclude women from the vote, explicitly limiting suffrage to "free, white males." Whereas women's previous exclusion had mostly been on the basis of custom, the new restrictions had the force of law. Moreover, with each passing year both the Republicans and Federalists systematized, regularized, and institutionalized the operations of their party organizations. The growth of party caucuses for nominating candidates, the development of more sophisticated electioneering techniques, and the use of ticket system at elections became more common. As a result, over time both Jeffersonians and Federalists turned their attention away from public activities meant to gain the support of the masses and concentrated their efforts on building party loyalty and getting out the vote among their followers. A politics out-of-doors and in the streets that had included both women and men gave way to more selective gatherings of the party faithful, who were all men. Political leaders now cultivated those that mattered most: white male electors.Cultural changes occurring after the turn of the century solidified and reaffirmed women's exclusion. Thinkers of the trans-Atlantic Enlightenment had promoted an environmentalist notion of difference that attributed variations between the sexes to custom, education, or upbringing. With sufficient education and opportunity, it was said, women might accomplish as much as men. By the early nineteenth century, however, a more essentialist view of

human nature gained prominence. Slowly and erratically, in a variety of venues ranging from scientific literature to medical textbooks to popular periodicals, distinctions between the sexes came to be seen not in terms of custom, tradition, or as an accident of nature but the result of innate, biological differences. Women's bodies were not just different from men's; they were inferior. As a result, the exclusion of women from the polity need not be considered unfair, arbitrary, or capriciousjust the recognition of scientific "fact."Popular attitudes toward women and politics thus changed radically in a short time. The American Revolution opened up possibilities for women that were soon foreclosed. In public discourse, the open ferment surrounding the debate over women's rights, including the possibility that women might have political rights, gave way to an insistence on the strict separation of men's and women's roles. Women would be responsible for home and society; men for government and politics. Even when they engaged in activities of political importance, such as benevolence and social reform, the women themselves emphatically denied the political nature of their behavior and distanced themselves from the tawdry world of male party and electoral politics. Over time, states imposed new prohibitions that excluded women from voting. As a result, the capacious heterosexual realm of revolutionary-era politics became an increasingly masculine space, receptive only to those who counted: white male voters. To justify these exclusions, it was said that women's inherent biological nature, not inherited customs and traditions, precluded the possibility of their participating in government or politics.Yet this is not to say that all the gains of the revolutionary era were lost. At issue here is the precise meaning of the terms "politics" and "political" and a distinction between how people at the time understood women's actions as opposed to how historians today characterize their behavior. My study tries to analyze "politics" in the terms that people at the time used to understand the concept. This understanding changed significantly from the Revolution to the Age of Jackson, moving from a broad conception that included both sexes and encompassed activities that occurred out-of-doors and in-the-streets to a narrower conception that referred primarily to party and electoral politics. This shift does not vitiate the present-day approaches that help us to see the political dimension of activities and behaviors that occurred beyond the bounds of formal political processes and outside of official institutions of government. As dozens of recent studies have suggested, women throughout the years from the Revolution until the Civil War continued to act politically. Even lacking the vote, women read and wrote about political events, engaged in political discussions, and participated in a wide array of public activities. Perhaps even more important, the rise of charitable societies, benevolent organizations, and social reform movements, especially temperance and anti-slavery, gave women a whole host of new vehicles for contributing to the common good. Their actions helped shape the most important political debates of the time. Thus both contemporaneous and present-day understandings of politics must be kept in mind. Even as party and electoral politics became more closed to women, and women became more reluctant to identify their behavior as "political," women themselves continued to play a key role in the nation's political life. Unlike the women of the immediate post-Revolutionary era, however, they did not do because they were encouraged to participate in politics but in spite of rampant hostility and discrimination. Despite women's continuing political influence, the almost universal belief was that women had no place in either politics or government.In the end, the soundness of all works of history depends on their faithfulness to what people actually wrote, thought, said, and did in the past. We can know this only through the sources that have survived. Records by and about women's political activities in the distant past are much less voluminous, less accessible, and more scattered than those of men. To take a case in point: while many archives preserved the correspondence of even the most minor members of Congress, they much less frequently retained the letters from their wives. In fact, only recently has the correspondence of Martha Washington and Dolley Madison, wives of major political figures, been published in scholarly editions. In order to study the political role of women in post-revolutionary America, then, we must look to the traditional sources of male political history, including newspapers, legislative records, political pamphlets, and correspondence among political elites. Read with a sensitivity to issues concerning gender, these documents do have something to tell us about women and politics; in fact, they have much more to say than most people assume. At the same time, we must expand our scope to include other kinds of sources: popular periodicals and ladies' magazines; Fourth-of-July orations; fiction; satire; and the writings of women themselves contained in letters to their husbands, friends, and relatives. These sources get us closer to the actual experiences of women and to the thinking of the wider public at the time. It is also true that the sources primarily reflect the thinking of white, middle-class and elite Americans rather than black people, lower-class people, or other marginalized groups. Nonetheless, it is in this expanded public arena that the ferment about women's political rights was occurring. What these documents say about women may not seem surprising today. Yet in the decades following the American Revolution the issue of women's rights was so explosive that after a brief moment of receptivity, American women and men chose to foreclose the debate rather than pursue it to its logical conclusion.Despite, or perhaps because of these constraints, Americans confrontedperhaps for the first timethe limits of their revolutionary ideology with respect to women. Women were excluded from government not because they lacked sufficient knowledge, intellect, or virtue, but simply on the basis of their sexbecause they were women. This also suggests the darker side of the democratic process; that is, how the broadening of political opportunities for white males meant that the increasing exclusion of white females. Rather than a straightforward march toward progress ending in women's achievement of full political equality with men, this story, then, involves many false starts, much

resistance, and many detours. Women had agency, but there were limits to their agency. Just as we can no longer think about rise of American liberty during the American Revolution without also considering its underside, the role of slavery, so we should also understand that democratization for white males in the early republic resulted in the more deliberate exclusion of women from politics and governance. The consequences of this development continue to bedevil us even today.