

# Saving Washington: Background Essay

## Module 1 Unofficial Politician: Dolley Madison in Early Washington

### WOMEN DURING THE REVOLUTION

The traditional story of America's origins focuses almost entirely on the Founding Fathers and the men who fought the battles, a well-known narrative that discounts the real contributions of women. Throughout the founding era, women's rights and roles were restricted by coverture, the ancient English common law that placed females under the control of fathers and husbands. It made them largely invisible in the law, and its wide shadow made them largely invisible in history. But women were present, and deeply involved in the political events around them.

During the Revolution, some women aligned with the British. For wealthy women, the reason may have been that they were invested in trade and knew that a war would disrupt the economy. Runaway slaves, including some who belonged to George Washington, were drawn to the



Johannes Adam Simon Oertel, *Pulling Down the Statue of King George III*, New York City, 1852–1853. Oil on canvas. New-York Historical Society, Gift of Samuel V. Hoffman, 1925.6.

British side by the promise of freedom. On the Patriot side, women found inventive ways to aid the drive toward independence. Even before the war broke out, women were boycotting British imports like tea and fabric, two products deeply ingrained in women's lives. When the statue of King George was pulled down in New York after the reading of the Declaration of Independence, women and children in Connecticut received the broken statue, melted the metal, and made bullets. And when a signal was hung in the Old North Church

to send Paul Revere on his famous ride, the secret information about enemy troop movements had probably come from Margaret Kemble Gage, the American-born wife of Britain's top general, Thomas Gage. He banished her to England.

As the war continued, women served as behind-the-scenes political agents, and a small number fought alongside male soldiers. Some followed their husbands and supported the war effort by cooking, mending, and caring for the wounded. The



John Singleton Copley, *Mrs. James Warren (Mercy Otis)*, ca. 1763. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of Winslow Warren, 31.212.

### THE POST- REVOLUTION ROLE OF WOMEN

When the war ended, the lingering revolutionary spirit opened a window, allowing women to join the high-stakes conversation about America's future. A few were able to speak and

Revolutionary Army was only possible because of female labor performing these crucial survival duties. Other women remained at home and managed farms and businesses alone. Housewives continued to boycott British goods, turning their buying habits into powerful political tools. When protestors took to the streets, women stood with their fists and voices raised.

write openly about politics, which had not been acceptable previously. Mercy Otis Warren, who had published anti-British satire during the war, was the best known of these "female politicians." She wrote against the ratification of the Constitution, equating Federalism with "aristocratic tyranny," and later produced a three-volume history of the Revolution.

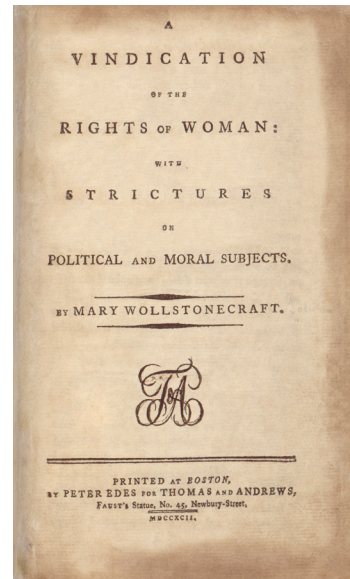
By the early 1800s, this window of opportunity had closed. Women were encouraged to resume traditional female roles, but with an important new twist. In order for

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the republic to thrive, the nation needed a citizenry that understood and was committed to American ideals. Women were uniquely placed, and uniquely qualified, to reinforce these values in their husbands and children. Scholars call this idea republican womanhood. It gave many women a new sense of purpose and a personal connection to the country's future. Educational opportunities for women improved, to better prepare them for this role. Literacy rates increased among white, mostly Northern urban women who had the resources to pursue an education.

Regardless of race or class, women participated in political life. They remained engaged through reading and discussion. They took part in petition campaigns, to help war widows, for example. To support early anti-slavery efforts, they formed church groups, and joined boycotts of slave-produced crops like sugar and cotton. And they considered the role of women by reading revolutionary new works on the subject, like Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* and Judith Sargent Murray's essay, "On the Equality of the Sexes."

Even as coverture limited rights, the Enlightenment had changed



Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1794, title page. New-York Historical Society Library, Y1794 Woll Vin.

some attitudes about women. They were increasingly thought to have special strengths that men lacked, especially in relation to morality, religion, and social behavior. At a 1790 Independence Day celebration, one speaker cast these strengths in a new, more political, light: "The men possess the more ostensible powers of making and executing laws . . . [but] the women in every free country, have an absolute control of manners; and it is confessed, that in a republic, manners are of equal importance with laws."

The speaker, James Tilton, was addressing a group of former soldiers, and used "manners," as it was understood at the time. Historian Rosemarie Zagari notes that the word "connoted ideas of individual morality and personal character, suggesting a strong connection between private values and public behavior. . . . [It] implied something more profound than the way a person held his or her teacup."

Republican womanhood directed women's energies toward their husbands and children. But the belief that women were responsible for the nation's moral fiber applied more broadly as well. It meant new responsibilities and new openings for women, as Dolley Madison's life and work would show.

### DOLLEY MADISON

In 1801, James Madison was appointed secretary of state by the recently elected president, Thomas Jefferson. It was a harshly partisan time in the still-unfinished capital city. Little social life existed where congressmen might have relaxed together, or begun to get along. Most came to Washington only to work, leaving families at home as they crammed into uncomfort-



Joseph Wood, *Dolley (Payne) Todd Madison*, 1817. Oil on canvas. Virginia Historical Society, 1967.14.

able boarding houses. Political disagreements festered and grew. Some legislators refused to speak to others. A few resorted to physical blows, even duels.

When President Thomas Jefferson invited politicians to dinner at the White House (then called the President's Palace or President's House), he invited one side at a time, never both at once. In this way he avoided partisan conflict, and strengthened his own hand by preventing factions from working together. This approach made partisanship worse, and Dolley Madison took a different tack. She saw the importance of social

contact, and she entertained often and happily. A woman who never forgot a name, who dressed for elegance and effect, and who enjoyed sharing a pinch of snuff with her guests, Dolley never seemed to behave in an overtly political way. She was far more politically astute than people realized, but her skills would have been seen as indelicate and unwomanly. Dolley kept them well hidden behind a warm smile and a beautiful dress. But she understood politics, knew what the issues were, and who should talk to whom. Her parties were an opportunity for her to put this knowledge to work.

Battles might rage in Congress, but at the Madisons' gatherings—held in their home during the secretary of state years, and later in the White House—guests obeyed the rules of social life, which required good etiquette and good character. In this setting, with women present, men behaved as gentlemen and even enemies began to converse. These events offered politicians a regular, friendly environment in which to both socialize and work, to find points of agreement, and to bring the Constitution to life "on the ground."