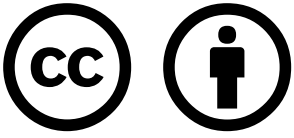


A History of Women in the United States

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RENE MILLER PAREDES



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Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
About the Author	viii
Introduction	1
Words Matter	4
 Part I. <u>Women Before European Colonization</u>	
1. Indigenous Women Before Colonization	9
2. Women in Medieval Europe	13
3. Women in West Africa	18
 Part II. <u>Colonial and Revolutionary Women (1607-1800)</u>	
4. Women Under English Law	23
5. Indigenous Women in the Colonies	26
6. European Women in the British Colonies	30
7. African Women in the Colonies	39
8. Witchcraft and Women	44
9. Revolutionary Women and Republican Motherhood	49
 Part III. <u>Antebellum Women and the Civil War (1800-1865)</u>	
10. Cult of Domesticity	63
11. Working Class Women	71
12. Southern Women	75
13. Moral Reform	82
14. First Wave Feminism--Woman's Suffrage	90
15. Women in Westward Expansion	96
16. Women in the Civil War	109
 Part IV. <u>Women in the Gilded Age through the Roaring 20s (1865-1929)</u>	
17. Immigrant Women in the Gilded Age	123
18. African American Women	127
19. Pink Collar Jobs	132
20. Progressive Reform and the New Woman	140

21. Progressive Women of Color	150
22. The Great Migration	155
23. World War I and the Roaring 20s	158

Part V. National Emergencies and Second Wave Feminism (1929-Present)

24. Women in the Great Depression	167
25. Women in World War II	173
26. Post-War America	178
27. Second Wave Feminism	185
28. Indigenous Feminism	191
29. Black/African American Feminism	194
30. Chicana and Latina Feminism	196
31. Asian American Feminism	199
32. Women in Politics	202

References	207
------------	-----

<i>Front Matter</i>	207
---------------------	-----

I. <i>Women Before European Colonization</i>	207
--	-----

II. <i>Colonial and Revolutionary Women</i>	208
---	-----

III. <i>Antebellum Women and the Civil War</i>	211
--	-----

IV. <i>Women in the Gilded Age Through the Roaring 20s</i>	215
--	-----

V. <i>National Emergencies and Second Wave Feminism</i>	219
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To my mother, who taught me to find inspiration in the stories of the past,

To my daughters, who are writing their own stories,

and to Kelsey & Jacqui for your guidance as I wrote this book.

Cover art created in [Canva](#) and is used according to the [Pro Content License terms](#). Sunflower graphic by [@sindycoolcool](#).

Purple and sunflowers were chosen for the cover to reflect key symbols of the women's suffrage movement in the United States. Purple represents loyalty and dignity, while the yellow/gold sunflowers symbolizes hope and traces back to early suffrage campaigns, particularly in Kansas (the Sunflower State). Together, they symbolize the determination and optimism that defined the women's suffrage movement and its fight for voting rights.

About the Author

Rene Miller Paredes is a History instructor at Lemoore College, in the West Hills Community College District, located in California's Central San Joaquin Valley. She holds Bachelor's and Master's degrees from California State University, Fresno, and she wrote her thesis on the influence of the Cult of Domesticity on women in Westward expansion from 1840-1890. Rene is passionate about history and believes that immersive historical experiences are the best way for modern people to gain insight into the lives of people in the past. To that end, she volunteers at local museums and historical events, often wearing time period clothing, to help facilitate educational experiences for the public. Rene challenges everyone to learn about the history that makes us uncomfortable, for it is in this discomfort that we grow.



Introduction

Learning Objectives

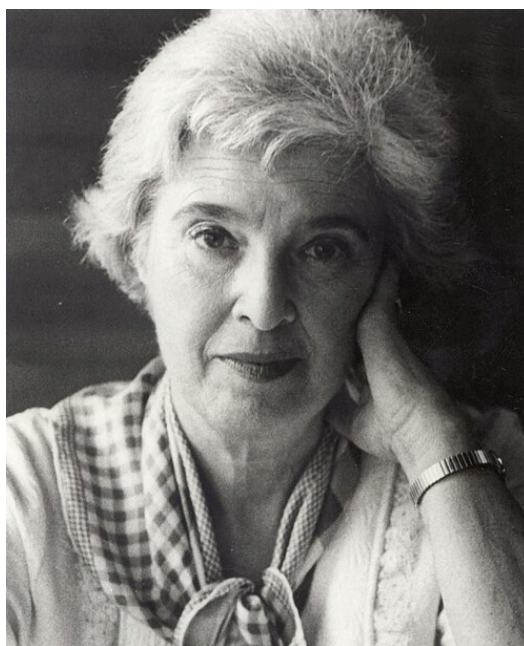
- Identify the various sources used by historians in general and women's historians in particular.
- Describe how and why the study of women's history came about.

Why Women's History?

History is the study of the written record left by humans, but historians often use information from other academic fields, such as Anthropology and Archaeology, to form as complete a picture as possible of what life was like in the past. It is primarily through these other academic fields that the story of women comes from because the written record was dominated by men until quite recently. In most cultures, political leaders were men, scribes were men, and religious leaders were men. Women, if they were included at all, were typically written about by men, so we only see them through the eyes of men rather than through their own eyes. Men, not women, have told women's stories. Archaeology and Anthropology provide physical evidence of women's lives, primarily around hearth and home, but we know surprisingly little about the lives of half the human population until after the invention of the printing press in the 15th century.

Even after the invention of printing, most women were unable to read and write until the 19th century, so the record we do have about them is spotty, brought to us through the pens of the few women who were privileged enough to have an education. Literate women were typically wealthy and connected to wealthy, powerful, and educated men, and this too clouds our view of most women's lives. Up until about 2020, the majority of books were published by men, according to NPR, and male writers still dominate most media, according to Editor and Publisher. Given that men have dominated the written record for the entirety of human writing, we can assume that most history is told from their point of view and is about issues, events, and people that men cared about.

Studying women's history as a separate course of study is an attempt to retell history from the point of view of women and find out about the issues, events, and people that women cared about. Unlike general history, which has been taught in universities for hundreds of years, women's history in the United States began out of Second Wave Feminism during the 1960s and was first taught by historian Gerda Lerner in 1968 at Sarah Lawrence College. Dr. Lerner later published the first women's history textbook in 1971 and created "Women's History Week," which eventually became Women's History Month. Gerda Lerner is considered the godmother of women's history, and without her work, this textbook would not exist.



[Dr. Gerda Lerner, 1981](#) is from the University of Wisconsin, Madison Archives and is used under Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported license.

How Do We Study Women's History?

Traditional history textbooks, such as those for K-12 and college level United States History, usually teach about women using what is sometimes referred to as the “add women and stir” approach. For example, a chapter on the American Revolution will include a side bar with a photo of Abigail Adams and a short line about her influence on John Adams, who was one of the authors of the Declaration of Independence. More recent textbooks may even include a link to or a quote from one of her letters to her husband, often referred to as the “Remember the Ladies” letter in which she tells her husband to include protection for women when forming the new government of the country. But what does this tell us about the average woman's experience during the Revolution? Were most women thinking of having more rights when the war was over, or were they concerned with keeping their families safe from roving armies or worried about their husbands returning safely from battle? Were they involved in the war effort? Did they actually fight? The side bar picture of Abigail Adams is silent on these questions, as is her letter to her husband. While adding in the photos and stories of a few remarkable women is viewed by many as enough, it is important to note that women are half of the population, and the experiences of these few, privileged, and literate women are not reflective of the experiences of most women of their time.

Another approach to women's history is to focus on the discrimination that has existed against women throughout history and the various waves of feminism that have sought to change the laws that have limited women's rights. Most general history textbooks cover the most important of these laws, such as the passage of the 19th amendment that gave women the right to vote in 1920 or *Roe v. Wade*, which gave women the right to an abortion in the first trimester of pregnancy in 1973. What we don't see in this approach is the impact the lack of rights had for women or the impact gaining rights had for them. We don't know what women thought about not having rights or having to fight for rights that were automatically given to men.

Women “firsts” are also typically covered in general history textbooks and are similar to “add women and stir” in that they tend to highlight a single woman as representative of her field of study. Even these firsts are often framed as exceptions because they broke through some barrier set up by men. For example, Marie Curie won the Nobel Prize

twice, but this was alongside her husband, and it is quite likely that Madam Curie would not have been taken seriously without a man by her side. In fact, after his death in 1906, she worked several years as a substitute for her husband before finally being able to teach in her own right. Further, many women were only able to publish under a male pen name, including Joanne Rowling, who used her initials to disguise her gender so that her book series, Harry Potter, would be well received by young male readers. Harry Potter was published in 1997!

While women's history books and courses include famous women, women firsts, and the long road against legal discrimination, what truly distinguishes women's history from general history is that it is told from the point of view of women. Whenever possible, women's writings and other material are used to tell women's stories. For example, when writing my master's thesis, I used the diaries and letters of hundreds of women who wrote down their experiences during westward expansion. Most of these women were White, because education was still limited to White women during most of the 19th century, and their Whiteness influenced their point of view about the times they lived in. In addition to primary sources such as diaries and letters, we can use official records such as census data, birth, marriage, and death records, newspaper articles, and court records as secondary sources to piece together the lives of women and gain a sense of what they were experiencing and what they thought of their lives at the time.

Just as general U.S. History textbooks have focused on men because sexism meant they were the record keepers, women's history textbooks have, until quite recently, focused more on the story of White women than the story of Women of Color because of racism. Historians of women began to acknowledge this limitation in the 1990s, and textbooks are now written to include the voices of Black/African American women, Latinas, Asian, and Indigenous women, and, even more recently, women from Southwest Asia (sometimes referred to as the Arab world or Middle East) as well as Lesbian women. This textbook will include these women's stories as well.

How is This Textbook Organized?

This textbook will follow the traditional timeline of most United States history textbooks, beginning with the perspectives about women within the three major ethnic groups who encountered one another at first contact, beginning with Indigenous women, then English and African women. We will follow the timeline from the colonial and early Republic periods through Antebellum (between the War of 1812 and the Civil War), the Gilded Age, World Wars 1 & 2, the 1920s, Great Depression, and up to present times. However, our book will focus on women and their stories during the various time periods of United States history, including examples of the experiences of women and their point of view from their own writings whenever possible. Emphasis early on will be placed on English women and the laws of England, because while there are women from all over the world in the colonies, the area that became the United States was controlled by Great Britain, and their laws impacted all women in their colonies. As women from new ethnic groups are incorporated into the United States, either through the expansion of or immigration to the United States, their stories will be added.

Before we begin the history, let's first look at the terminology that we use when studying gender and race in academia and modern culture.

Words Matter

Learning Objectives

- Define and explain the various terms used in the study of history, gender, and ethnic studies.

Vocabulary is very important when studying any academic discipline. We must understand the terminology used in the readings as well as by instructors and other students so that we avoid confusion. Words and their meanings also change over time, and sometimes, a term that was considered polite to one generation is considered taboo or offensive to another. In this textbook, I will use terms that are accepted in the current academic disciplines of history, gender, and ethnic studies. However, many of the primary sources that we will study in this textbook will use terms that were considered appropriate a century ago but are no longer acceptable. Please keep this in mind as you read the material.

Below is a list of terms we commonly use when studying history, gender, and ethnic studies and their meanings, according to the Cambridge Dictionary online unless otherwise noted:

History: “(the study of or a record of) past events considered together, especially events of a particular period, country, or subject. When I was in college, I was taught that history focused on written records, while archaeology focused on artifacts, or the physical record humans left behind.

Primary Source: “An original document, etc. created at the same time as an event or a period that is being studied, or a person who has experienced an event themselves and can report on it.” Examples include letters, diaries, autobiographies, newspapers, census records, birth, marriage, and death records, court records, including testimonies, and laws.

Secondary Source: “A report, book, etc. in which the writer writes about an event or period that they themselves have not experienced, using information that they have obtained from other people or documents.” This textbook is a secondary source, although it includes primary sources within it.

Woman: “An adult female human being” is the first definition, followed by “an adult who lives and identifies as female though they may have been considered to have a different sex at birth.” The second definition reflects social changes that have occurred over the last several decades, but it is important to note that transgender women have always existed in United States History.

Sex: “The physical state of being either male, female, or intersex.” The term “sex” has historically applied to biology.

Gender: “A group of people in a society who share particular qualities of ways of behaving which that society associates with being male, female, or another identity. The term “gender” has historically applied to social rules and norms rather than biological distinctions. For example, gender roles within the traditional family are that women do housework and care for children while men work for wages outside the home.

Gender Binary: “The idea that there are only two genders and everyone is either male or female.” Someone who is “nonbinary” does not identify as male or female only but integrates aspects of both. For example, celebrity hairstylist Johnathan Van Ness has long hair and a beard and wears dresses.

Culture: “The way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time.” Also “the attitudes, behavior, opinions, etc. of a particular group of people within society.” These two definitions are incredibly broad, and that’s the point. Much of what humans do can be defined as culture. For example, religion, language, sacred and celebratory rites, gender roles, food, music, clothing, and more are all considered culture. There are also subcultures, or cultures within cultures, such as Queer culture, Youth culture, Bohemian culture, even “fandoms” can be considered subcultures since there are specific behaviors and customs within the group.

Patriarchy: “A society in which the oldest male is the leader of the family, or a society controlled by men in which they use their power to their own advantage.”

Patrilineal: “In a patrilineal society or relation, the fact of someone belonging to a particular family depends only on the male relatives.” An example of this is the Western tradition of women taking on their husband’s last name when they marry, which symbolizes leaving their father’s family and going to their husband’s family.

Matrarchy: “A type of society in which women have most of the authority and power, or a society in which property belongs to women and is given to children by women rather than men.”

Matrilineal: “In a matrilineal society or relationship, the fact of someone belonging to a particular family depends only on female relatives.” In the nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, women choose their son’s wife and he moves from his mother’s home to his wife’s home. This is an example of matrilineal society.

Equality: “The right of different groups of people to have a similar social position and receive the same treatment.” The focus here is on “sameness.”

Equity: “The situation in which everyone is treated fairly according to their needs and no group of people is given special treatment.” The focus here is on “fairness.” For example, a blind student needs their book in Braille because that is equitable. Not all students in the class are blind, so providing a book in Braille is “fair” but not necessarily the “same” treatment.

Race: “One of the main groups to which people are often considered to belong, based on physical characteristics that they are perceived to share such as skin color, eye shape, etc.” At one time, race was considered a scientific fact, but today we consider race to be a social construct.

Ethnicity: “A large group of people with a shared culture, language, history, set of traditions, etc., or the fact of belonging to one of these groups.” People often confuse or equate race and ethnicity, which leads to confusion. Arabs are from the same ethnicity because they share a language and many cultural traits. However, there are still local differences in dialects, food, and other aspects of culture.

Minority: “Any small group in society that is different from the rest because of their race, religion, or political beliefs, or a person who belongs to such a group.” Importantly, women are considered a minority even though they are not a small group in terms of numbers and they aren’t really different from the rest, they are just different from men. In the case of women, a better definition of “minority” is a group that has historically had limited access to political, economic, and social power.

Nationality: “The state of belonging to a particular country or being a citizen of a particular country.” Today, people call themselves “Americans” if they are from the United States, so that is their nationality. However, America includes all of the countries of North, Central, and South America as well as the islands off the coast of the American continent, and people from the other countries in the Americas sometimes express frustration at people from the US who have taken this name for themselves.

Prejudice: “An unfair and unreasonable opinion or feeling, especially when formed without enough thought or knowledge.” Think “pre-judge” literally making a judgement before you have all of the facts or information.

Discrimination: “Treating a person or particular group of people differently, especially in a worse way from the way you treat other people, because of their race, gender, sexuality, etc.”

Intersectionality: “The way in which different types of discrimination (=unfair treatment because of a person’s sex, race, etc.) are connected to and affect each other.” This term will be applied in this textbook to women of color, poor women, lesbian and bisexual women, and women outside the gender binary.

Sexism: “(actions based on) the belief that the members of one sex are less intelligent, able, skillful, etc. than the members of the other sex, especially that women are less able than men.” Male sexism against women is sometimes referred to as misogyny while female sexism against men is sometimes referred to as misandry. Both are forms of sexism; however, since men have historically had more power than women, most people think of sexism as misogyny.

Sexual Assault: “The act of forcing someone to take part in a sexual activity with you or of touching someone in a sexual way when they do not want you to.” This term is an umbrella term that includes any form of non-consensual sexual contact, from groping to rape.

Rape Culture: “Is a setting, as described by some sociological theories, in which rape is pervasive and normalized due to that setting’s attitudes about gender and sexuality.” This definition was not in the Cambridge Dictionary, but I found it not only on Wikipedia but also on multiple domestic violence awareness websites. This term has been used since the 1960s Second Wave Feminism but has become much more commonplace in our society’s everyday language recently. While the term “rape” is used here, it really refers to any non-consensual sexual contact, or sexual assault, as examples of rape culture. The basic idea is that men own women and have the rights to their bodies. It is the ultimate patriarchal claim, and it is pervasive within many cultures, not just the United States. Effects of rape culture include victim blaming, which is the idea that the victim, who is usually a woman, somehow brought the sexual assault on herself, often through clothing or behavior, such as drinking alcohol.

Body Autonomy: “Bodily autonomy is defined as the right to make decisions about your own body, life, and future, without coercion or violence.” This definition is from the MSI United States organization, which works to educate globally about the idea of body autonomy. Similar definitions were also found on other websites, including several dedicated to Autistic and other differently abled people, which shows that this term applies to a wide variety of people, not just women. Body autonomy is usually used in women’s studies to criticize rape culture and to advocate for reproductive freedom, although it is also applied to access and advocacy in health care.

Sexualize: “To see someone or something in sexual terms, or to make someone or something sexually exciting.” The term “hypersexualize” is sometimes used in place of sexualize. This term is a product of rape culture and is usually used to refer to sexualizing women and girls without their consent or the damaging impact of sexualizing women and girls, which includes an increased violence against women.

Feminism: “The belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state.” Feminists are people who hold these beliefs. It is important to note that men can, and are, feminists, and not all women are feminists.

Question to Consider

Are there any terms listed above that have a different definition than you were taught?

PART I

WOMEN BEFORE EUROPEAN COLONIZATION

I. Indigenous Women Before Colonization

Learning Objectives

- Evaluate the roles of women within indigenous societies before European colonization.
- Analyze the value placed on indigenous women within sacred spaces.

Prior to the arrival of Europeans in 1492, historians estimate that there were anywhere between 50 and 100 million people living across both the North and South American continents and on the islands off the coast of these continents. Within the borders of present-day United States, there were approximately ten million people. When Europeans arrived, they brought diseases that the indigenous populations had no immunity to, such as smallpox, influenza, and measles, and the native population of the Americas plunged by 80% due to death toll of these illnesses and the chaos wreaked by wars and famine as the various European powers swept through the Americas. Many indigenous communities were destroyed long before White scholars could begin to study them, and as was mentioned in the introduction, these mostly male scholars tended to focus on indigenous men. It is also important to note that there is no such thing as “Native,” “Indian,” or “Indigenous” culture because there were hundreds of nations, tribes, and clans scattered throughout the Americas, particularly in North America, which will be the focus of this textbook on the United States. What follows here are generalizations about indigenous women and should in no way be construed as encompassing the lives and experiences of all of the indigenous women in North America.

Daily Lives

The daily lives of indigenous women varied widely based on the geography and climate in which they lived, but they were typically in charge of preparing food and clothing as well as childrearing. In the woodland regions east of the Mississippi River in North America, women managed the farmland used to sustain the tribes, growing crops such as corn, beans, and squash, often referred to as the three sisters because they grow in tandem and rely on one another for pest control and fertilizer. Women planted, harvested, and preserved these crops to sustain their families through the winter months. However, along the west coast of North America, women did not typically engage in agriculture and instead gathered plants, acorns, and shellfish in a far more temperate climate. Regardless of the region, women gathered wild plants for food and medicine while the men hunted and fished. Women also engaged in trade both among nearby villages and with other tribes, acquiring items that they could not produce themselves.

Women made clothing, blankets, and containers for cooking and storage for their households out of whatever materials were nearby. In the desert Southwest, women made pottery and wove baskets using the materials in their environment, such as clay and remnants of old pottery and grasses or tree branches, which are split and woven together. These items were utilitarian, although they were also beautiful and often intricate, particularly if they were to be used in sacred ceremonies.



[New Mexican Woman Weaving a Basket in 1992.](#) Image is in the Public Domain.

Native women usually produced the clothing for their families as well, and the materials used depended upon the materials found in the surrounding areas. Some women wove skirts from grass or leaves while others made buckskin dresses, leggings, and moccasins from animal hide. Clothing was often adorned with beads, shells, and ribbons, displaying personal preference, ownership, or clan membership. Women also used bones, beads, shells, pearls, and precious stones and metals such as copper and silver to make jewelry.



The above image is a robe of the Tlingit people of Southwestern Alaska. The red image is a raven, indicating that the wearer is of the Raven Clan. It is trimmed with shells, notably the abalone for the eye, and is still worn in ceremonies. Photo from Saxman Native Village Community Center, Ketchikan, Alaska by Rene Miller Paredes.

Sacred World

Indigenous health care was closely connected to spirituality, and women from a variety of tribes were often the connection because they were believed to have more healing powers than men. Medicine women gathered necessary herbs and created remedies for illnesses, wounds, inflammation, and sang sacred chants to soothe the soul of the patient

and to connect with the spirit world. Commonly used herbs include purple coneflower (Echinacea), ginkgo (ginkgo biloba), St. John's Wort (Hypericum perforatum), Mugwort (Artemisia vulgaris) and more. Though these plants were and still are used to cure physical ailments, the primary focus of using these herbs was to ask the spirit of the plant to heal the spirit of the patient. Certain parts of the plants were used for certain ailments. For example, before a pregnant woman went into labor, she would drink root bark and Cherokee women would drink an infusion of cherry bark for a fast delivery. Women were often central in indigenous creation stories such as White Buffalo Calf Woman, who gave the Lakota their sacred ceremonies. The term "Mother Earth" is still used to connect the creation of life with women.

"It's been said that Mother Earth was the first Indigenous woman. After all, she is the original life giver, the first ancestor of us all, from microscopic single-celled organisms to colossal prehistoric dinosaurs and the fabled leviathan of the deep. Her blood, our fresh water, flows along her surfaces like so many veins and capillaries, forming rivers and tributaries that sustain us. We evolved to exist in unison, forever linked and connected as relations. We are a part of her, stardust children of the Sky and Earth. She is the divine feminine, Creator and Mother. There is no humanity without her." – Ruth H. Hopkins, Dakota/Lakota Sioux (First Nations Development Institute).

Because of women's ability to give birth, their reproductive cycles were seen as important and sacred times. A young woman's first menstruation was often a time of celebration as she moved from childhood to womanhood, and most tribes had some type of coming-of-age ceremony for women, which included tests of physical strength and spiritual connection. Many indigenous communities maintained separate lodgings for women when they were menstruating, called "Moon Lodges" among many Woodland tribes. In these lodges, women were cared for by other women, who brought them food and bathed them while they spent time resting, meditating, and praying. Menstruating women used herbs, especially mugwort, to relieve menstrual cramps. Menstrual blood created life and was considered sacred to many indigenous tribes.

It is worth noting that sex among many indigenous communities was considered a sacred, spiritual act, and this meant that rape and sexual assault were considered spiritual crimes as well as physical ones. These crimes were rare before European colonization and were often punished by banishment or death.

Political Power and Legal Rights

Government varied widely among the various indigenous communities in the Americas. Central America and Mexico, for example, were controlled by empires with male leaders, priests, and scribes, and women held subordinate roles within the political system. However, in smaller communities, women held more power. For example, among the Iroquois Confederation, women elected the leaders and could also remove them from leadership. Even in communities where women did not vote or were not leaders, their voices were still heard and they were consulted about important decisions. Because women often engaged in agriculture and managed the home, they often controlled them and passed them down to their daughters, meaning they were matrilineal. Mothers or grandmothers chose wives for their sons, often negotiating marriage contracts, and men left their mother's lodge and moved to their wife's lodge when they married. Women were often allowed to divorce their husbands and marry again without social stigma.

Conclusion

Women's social, economic, and political life varied widely among indigenous Americans, but one common thread is that among the smaller communities of North America, women were respected and had more rights than women from other cultures during the same time period. Women's natural bodily functions, such as menstruation and childbirth, were

honored and celebrated, viewed as a source of sacred strength and power. Native women were often able to choose their partners and divorce without stigma, giving them a great deal of power over their own happiness. Women were viewed as creators, and they created not only life in the form of children but also maintained their respective cultures through art, both common and sacred. They will lose most of their power and sacred standing during colonization.

2. Women in Medieval Europe

Learning Objectives

- Evaluate the roles of women in Europe during the Middle Ages.
- Analyze the Judeo-Christian religious tradition teachings about women.

Europe, like the Americas, is a continent containing many different cultures, languages, and nationalities. During the Medieval period (400s-1400s), Europe experienced invasion and conquest, political divisions and unifications, and internal wars, along with famines and pandemics, especially the Black Death, which killed one in every three Europeans. Life was difficult, often brutal, and usually short. The one unifying factor for most of Europe was Christianity, which impacted the daily lives of virtually everyone and influenced the way in which society viewed women.

Daily Lives

All European kingdoms and nation-states were patriarchal, dominated by the Catholic Church and its teachings about women and family life. Most women had few legal rights or protections (see *Women Under English Law*). Women of all classes were expected to be confined to or near the home, caring for children and livestock, tending gardens, preparing meals, and making clothing, which was a long process of carding and spinning raw materials and weaving cloth before making the garment itself. Wealthy and noble women managed household servants who performed these tasks, although in some regions they were also expected to spin, weave, and embroider. An example of noble women's exquisite embroidery can be found in the Bayeux Tapestry, which is 230 feet long by 20 inches tall and was embroidered entirely by women.



[Portion of the Bayeux Tapestry, dating to the 10th century.](#) Image drawn by Charles Stothard, published in 1823 and is in the Public Domain.

Women throughout Europe were expected to marry and have children. Wealthy and noble women often hired nurses for their children, so they became pregnant more frequently. Peasant women nursed their own children, which meant that most had a baby about every other year until menopause or death. Fewer than half of the children born in Europe during the Medieval period survived to adulthood. Birth control, as we understand it today, did not exist. However, abortion was legally allowed in England before “quickening,” which is when the fetus is felt moving, about 3-4 months gestation. Menstrual pain and pain in childbirth were considered punishment for Eve’s sin, and enduring it was a way to gain redemption, but midwives often used herbs such as the mandrake plant for pain relief. Miscarriages, stillbirths, and maternal mortality were all very common among all classes of women.

Women typically had no choice but to marry, but occasionally women were allowed to remain single so long as they joined a convent. Noble women who “misbehaved” were sometimes sent by their families to a convent to avoid embarrassment, and while peasant women typically did not join convents, they occasionally left their children in the care of nuns, which essentially guaranteed that their daughters would enter monastic life. Nuns were among the most highly educated people in Europe and were able to lead relatively independent lives, answering to female leadership within the convent. Becoming a nun was considered an outward display of purity, fitting with the image of Mary in Christianity.

Women and the Bible

The Catholic church dominated Europe for most of the Medieval period. The pope crowned kings and emperors and excommunicated those who did not follow his will. Laws in most European kingdoms, particularly as they pertained to women and family life, were based on the Bible. Common people’s lives revolved around their local parish church, which blessed their marriages, baptized their babies, and buried their loved ones. Religious festivals such as Christmas and the feast days of favorite saints created a sense of community and belonging. Even after Europe went through the Reformation and the pope lost influence, religious leaders continued to use the Bible to dictate social norms and Christianity would continue to regulate most people’s lives.

The Bible itself forms the bedrock sacred text for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the three great monotheistic religions. It establishes the idea of patriarchy not only as a social construct but as a religious one as well, ordained by

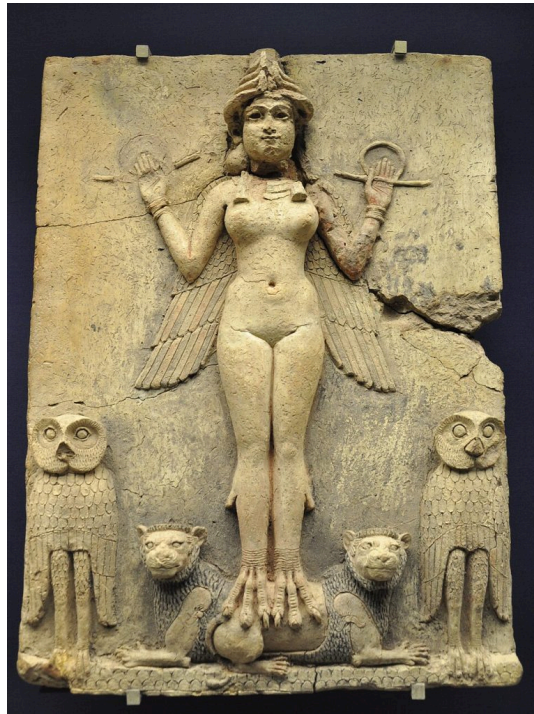
God. Within its pages we see women as evil temptresses, witches, whores, and pure virgins. We do not see them as merely human.

The Duality of Woman

Lilith and Eve

Most people are familiar the creation story from Genesis, that God first made a man, Adam, and because it was not right for him to be alone, God took his rib and made Eve, the first woman. The story is from Genesis, chapter 2, verses 20-25, and it is how many within the Judeo-Christian tradition explain patriarchy; since God made man first and woman second, he is clearly meant to rule over her. Except that this is the second creation story in Genesis, not the first. In Genesis chapter 1, verse 27, God created man and woman to take care of the world he had just created. Man and woman were created at the same time and were therefore equals.

This possible first wife of Adam from Genesis chapter 1 is considered to be Eve by most Christian scholars, and chapters, 1 and 2 are simply two versions of the same story. However, some scholars think she is a different woman, Lilith, and her image is well known in the ancient world. The story goes that Lilith refused to be dominated by Adam because they were created at the same time, so she fled the Garden of Eden, becoming a succubus or a demon, depending on the translation. References to Lilith appear in several ancient manuscripts, including the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, where she is depicted as a demon. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, when Lilith is brought up, she is a demon, a figure damned by God for eternity because she refused to obey her husband. A cautionary tale.



[Possible Early Image of Lilith on the Burney Relief, c 1800 BCE](#) is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported, 2.5 Generic, 2.0 Generic and 1.0 Generic](#) license.

Once Lilith left or was driven out of the Garden of Eden, God created Eve out of Adam's rib so that she would obey

him. Genesis chapter 3 tells us that Eve went on to be tempted by the devil in the form of a serpent to eat fruit from a forbidden tree. After she ate the fruit and didn't die like God told her she would, she gave Adam the fruit and told him to eat it, which he did. This is how sin entered the world, through a woman who was duped by the devil then turned around and tempted her husband, who fell into temptation with her. Women, then, are morally weak, easily duped, and need men to keep them in line.

Mary

The Old Testament abounds with stories of bad, manipulative women. Rebekah tricked her husband into giving her favorite son his birthright. Jezebel tempted the king to worship a false god. Delilah killed God's anointed servant Sampson. There are a few virtuous ones, like Ruth and Queen Esther, but the bad ones seem to dominate the narrative. Until Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

Mary is the opposite of Eve and Lilith in every way. Catholic tradition teaches that she was conceived without sin (Immaculate Conception), was a virgin when she conceived Jesus (virgin birth), and although she was married to Joseph, they lived together as brother and sister rather than husband and wife. Although the Protestant Reformation made changes to some of these details, the concept of the virgin birth remains at the cornerstone of Mary's story. She is considered the ultimate example of female purity and obedience to God, a figure every woman should aspire to be.



[The Annunciation by Eustache Le Sueur, c. 1650](#) is in the Public Domain.

Most women in the Bible are two-dimensional figures with little backstory of their own and only figure into the narrative in their relationships to men. Eve was Adam's wife and Mary was Jesus' mother. Eve disobeyed God and brought her husband into sin with her. Mary obeyed God and through her son, humanity was redeemed. Eve was bad. Mary was good. This dichotomy will dominate European perspective on women for centuries and will make its way to the Americas through colonization, where it will then be forced on first the indigenous population, then kidnapped Africans, up to the present day.

Conclusion

Medieval Europe was patriarchal due to its domination by Christian theology and leadership. Because the Bible depicted women as either good or bad, they had few options other than marriage or life in a convent. Women's daily lives were difficult, dominated by pregnancy and childcare, as well as caring for the household and farm. Regardless of class, Medieval European women could expect to be under the control of their male relatives, father, brother, husband, or son, from birth until death. These cultural and often legal traditions did not end at the borders of Europe but accompanied Europeans as they colonized North and South America. We will discuss how these European laws impacted women in what would become the United States in later chapters.

3. Women in West Africa

Learning Objectives

- Evaluate the roles of women within West African societies prior to the African diaspora of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.
- Analyze the value placed on West African women within sacred spaces.

Before the Europeans arrived along Africa's west coast in the 15th century, the region was home to diverse cultures, languages, religions, and political systems, much as it is today. A large river system connected the Atlantic coast to the interior while overland trade routes connected west Africa to the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates to the north and east. Kingdoms such as Ghana and Mali, centered in Timbuktu, spread their cultures through both conquest and influence throughout the region. The dominant religion in these kingdoms was Islam, and the city of Timbuktu had a large library where both men and women were allowed to study. Heading south down the rivers to the Atlantic ocean, smaller political organizations and tribal villages thrived, cultivating rice, sorghum, and millet, trading these crops and other goods with one another and to the larger kingdoms to the North. The largest ethnic groups of the region were the Mande and Yoruba, who also made up a large portion of the enslaved Africans brought to what became the United States during the 17th and 18th centuries. Thus West Africa, like Europe and the Americas, was extremely diverse and what follows are generalizations regarding political, social, and economic trends as they impacted West African women.

Daily Lives

West African society was often matrilineal, particularly among the smaller kingdoms and tribal villages along the rivers. Women wielded authority over land, household, and village life and were the primary agriculturalists, tending crops such as yams, rice, sorghum, and millet, as well as livestock and herb gardens, and they traded these items among neighboring villages as well as along the rivers and north to the kingdoms of Ghana and Mali. They were the caregivers to children and oversaw servants and slaves, who were considered members of the household and were treated as such. While West Africans did have several written languages, history was also kept orally and women were typically the keepers of both secular and sacred history and stories. The tribe and clan were the most important aspects of social life rather than "nuclear" family and these ties were strengthened through marriage. Social and political authority within most West African societies was based upon age, with elders, irrespective of gender, holding the most power and respect within the family, tribe, clan, and village.

In the larger kingdoms to the north, like Mali, Islam was the predominant religion and therefore these communities were more patriarchal than their counterparts to the south. Women still had authority over their households and families, but they often did not engage trade or other economic pursuits in their own right. Polygamy was and is allowed under Islamic law, but has never been widely practiced except within elite families. In these cases, a West African woman may share a husband with as many as three other women but would typically have her own household. The practice of veiling was less common in West Africa than Southwest Asia, although most women covered their heads when in public.

and were chaperoned by a male relative. Life in empires like Mali combined traditional West African ideas about women with the newer ones introduced by Islam.

Politics and Government

Whether governing the village or the kingdom, women had a voice in political decision making alongside men. Within smaller communities along the rivers, elders typically governed the village, regardless of they were male or female. Therefore women could be “chiefs” if they were the eldest in the community. As some of these villages expanded their authority, women continued to be political leaders and warriors, often alongside men in what is best described as a dual chieftainship.

The larger kingdoms between the rivers and the Sahara were far more patriarchal, although a queen often ruled together with her husband, the king, or in his stead if he left the kingdom. Many of these larger kingdoms followed Islam, which meant that women’s public lives were more limited than those of women who lived to the south. However, they were still afforded an education and protection under Islamic law.



[*The Balance of Femininity and Masculinity in Deities and Shrines*](#) by Daderot 2012 is in the Public Domain

Sacred Spaces

West African women’s authority and role within religion depended greatly on where she lived. As mentioned above, the Kingdom of Mali followed Islam, and although other religions were tolerated, Islamic law limited women in public spaces. Women could attend school and the university at Timbuktu, but they were segregated from men. The same occurred in the mosque, where women had separate entrances and spaces for cleansing and prayer.

In the villages and smaller kingdoms along the rivers south of Mali, religious beliefs were quite different and women held more authority in religious life. Most west Africans, except Muslims, were polytheistic, believing in many gods and goddesses. Women were often priestesses, oracles, and other spiritual leaders within their respective communities. They oversaw the processes of life, from childbirth to death, as well as honoring ancestors, because women were viewed as having a sacred connection to the spirit world that was sought during these important milestones. Coming of age ceremonies for girls involved special clothing, jewelry, and hair styles, as well as adornments for the hair, all produced by the women of her clan. The young girl was taken aside by the women of her clan to learn about being a woman, including sex and how to “navigate” her husband, then she was usually physically tested, prayed over or asked to be blessed by

the gods in her new role, then she was recognized by the community as a woman. Each community had their own unique coming of age ceremony marking when a girl became a woman, with variations on the aforementioned practices. However, women in West Africa were leaders in the religious life of their communities and were valued equally to men.



[Devotee of Oshun of the Yoruba People of West Africa](#) by Wikipedia Loves Art at the Honolulu Academy of Arts is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.5 Generic](#)

Conclusion

West Africa was and is a very diverse place, home to many languages, religions, cultures, economies, and political systems. The roles that women played within this wide variety of communities could differ greatly from one another, but in general, women were respected and honored for their contributions to their respective communities. Large regions, such as the Kingdom of Mali, were usually patriarchal and often followed Islam, which is within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Women's role in public spaces was more limited than in the smaller communities further south, but they still had access to education and managed their households. Further south, along the rivers that lead to the Atlantic, women often led their communities as elders, priestesses, or other positions of authority. They also kept the culture and history of their people, passing them down from generation to generation through the arts and oral traditions. The respect that West African women held in Africa would be completely upended upon their arrival to the Americas.

Question to Consider

What similarities do you find among Indigenous American, European, and West African women prior to colonization? In what ways are they different?

PART II

COLONIAL AND REVOLUTIONARY WOMEN (1607-1800)

4. Women Under English Law

Learning Objectives

- Define the basic legal distinctions of Feme Covert and Feme Sole under English Common Law.
- Recognize the legal distinction between free and indentured women.

Legal Powers

Although there are many different groups of women living in the British colonies of North America, all ultimately fall under the authority of the British government, which used English Common Law for its authority over women and family life. English Common Law was a largely unwritten collection of laws and traditions based upon Old and New Testament teachings and Old Roman and English laws. All English women, with few exceptions, fell under one of two legal distinctions, Feme Sole or Feme Covert, which defined their legal rights and social status both in England and its colonies.

Feme Sole

Feme Sole is a Latin term meaning “woman alone,” which refers to single women. During the Colonial period, typical Feme Sole included widows without adult male children and adult women without a father, brother, or uncle. In these cases, women were allowed to operate their own personal businesses or farms and have legal access to the courts, essentially holding the same legal rights as a man. Feme Sole held the advantage of self-determination and was not required to defer to any man to make decisions regarding her life.

While these women were able to have full control over their lives under the law, they lacked male protection, which could have devastating results. Many of the women accused of witchcraft, for example, were Feme Sole. Some women became Feme Sole because there were no males to inherit property upon their father's death, thus becoming potentially powerful property owners. The potential to wield power equal to that of a male was viewed by many in the colonies as an upset to traditional gender roles and often made the Feme Sole a target for gossip, character assassination, and even witchcraft accusation. Without male protection, such a woman would be at a serious disadvantage, regardless of her personal wealth.

Feme Covert

Feme Covert is a Latin term meaning “woman covered,” which refers to any woman who is under the legal “cover” or protection of a male relative. The most obvious example of Feme Covert is a married woman, but this distinction

includes any woman with a living male relative, such as a father or grandfather, brother, uncle, even adult son or son-in-law. Under English Common Law, women were considered the quasi-property of her husband or father, or a male relative who took responsibility for her, and were therefore subject to his rule but also his protection. This legal distinction is supported by the Judeo-Christian and Western European patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal traditions.

Feme Covert could not own or control property or a business in her own name and had no legal access to the court system. If a crime was committed against a married woman, for example, it was actually considered a crime against her husband and it would be he who brought the complaint or charges to court.

A widow would remain in Feme Covert status if she had an adult son, who would be required by law to care for and protect his mother upon the death of his father. English Common Law required that a son provide for his mother, giving her what was referred to as a “widow’s share” for her personal support. A “widow’s share” could be as large as a cash allowance and her own estate or as small as a corner within the home, depending upon the financial situation of her son.

In conclusion, within Colonial law, a woman’s entire life was dependent upon her male relatives. Her father, brother, or uncle saw to her education and arranged her marriage, her husband was her representation outside of the home and her sole support, and her son cared for her in her old age. Without a male relative’s protection and care, a colonial woman could be viewed as morally suspect and a threat to society. Whether legally distinguished as Feme Sole or Feme Covert, Colonial women wielded little power in the public sphere due to the patriarchal nature of English Common Law.

Indentured Servitude–Neither Covert nor Sole

English Common Law had allowed indentured servitude for several centuries before the founding of Jamestown, so it is logical that the system would be used in the English colonies. Indentured servants were typically poor people who had fallen into debt that they were unable to repay, therefore they were required to work off the debt, or sell their children to work off the debt. Debtor’s prisons were commonplace in England and many poor English men and women chose to travel to the Americas to work off their debt because they were promised a better life once their debts were paid. English men signed a contract for typically 4-5 years, after which time they were considered free men and were entitled to 50 acres of land, a suit of clothes, and a barrel of corn meal, although freedom dues could vary from colony to colony. English women’s contract was longer, typically 7 years, after which time they were freed but did not receive any freedom dues. Instead, they could typically expect to be married very quickly due to the lack of women living in the colonies. In Virginia, for example, there were more than 10 men to every woman living in the colony. Therefore, an English woman could expect to be married soon after her contract ended, thus entering into Feme Covert status.

Female indentured servants theoretically entered into their contract of their own free will, which indicates that they were Feme Sole, but many were actually sold by their fathers or brothers into servitude in the colonies in order to pay the family’s debt. Ship’s manifests of the 1600s indicated that as many as 75% of the women who arrived in Virginia were indentured servants, although many were classified as prostitutes simply because they were traveling alone. Others were “tobacco brides,” mail order brides paid for with tobacco rather than money. These women often had no choice who they married, the arrangement was made by family members, and typically had not met the man before arriving.

Indentured contracts were legally binding for both parties and could be changed or ended if one party broke the contract. For women, this often occurred due to pregnancy, which extended the contract for one year to make up for the loss of labor during the pregnancy and early months of child rearing. After the child was weaned, it would be sold into indentured servitude until its 21 birthday. However, women who were raped during their indenture, particularly by their owners, had legal recourse and could be freed from their contract. Early Virginia court cases indicate that at least a few women sued their owners for rape and won not only their case but their freedom and the freedom of their child, if a pregnancy had resulted from the rape. This indicates that female indentured servants operated as Feme Sole, with

access to the courts. On the other hand, if the woman was raped by a man who was not her owner, it was considered a crime against her owner, which indicates Feme Covert as the woman was under the legal cover of her owner, and the rapist was required to pay damages.

Conclusion

English law was not always written down, but it was recognized by society and by courts both in England and its colonies. Not only would it dominate the Colonial period, English law influenced the development of law in the United States until modern times. Regardless of a woman's country of origin, once she arrived in an area controlled by England, she fell under English law, which defined her by her marital status and condition of servitude.

Question to Consider

Which legal distinction do you think most colonial women preferred, Feme Sole or Feme Covert, and why?

5. Indigenous Women in the Colonies

Learning Objectives

- Describe the creation and impact of the “Indian Princess” archetype.
- Explain how English colonization disrupted the traditional social, economic, and political roles of Native women along the East coast.
- Describe the impact of English colonization on Native women during the 17th and 18th centuries.

The European conquest and colonization of the Caribbean and North and South America were devastating to the indigenous population. Millions died from war, famine, and diseases brought from Europe to which the Native American population had no immunity. Within the larger story of genocide, land theft, exploitation, and cultural destruction experienced by indigenous Americans is an equally horrific story of the experiences of Native women, who saw their complex role within their respective communities upended and reduced to stereotypes and tropes.

The Indian Princess Archetype

Malintzin and Mestizaje

From the moment Europeans arrived in the Caribbean in 1492, Indigenous people have been in a fight for their lives and the survival of their culture. More than a century before the English arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, Indigenous women endured the genocide of their people, sexual exploitation and rape, and forced assimilation into Spanish and Portuguese culture. Women such as Malintzin, known to the Spanish as Dona Marina and to history as La Malinche (the betrayer), were taken by Spanish soldiers as concubines, forced to navigate between cultures. Malintzin was taken by Hernan Cortez, who conquered the Aztec empire in 1519 largely because of her linguistic help in negotiating alliances with Aztec rivals. She is often accused of betraying the people of Mesoamerica, but in reality, she was a young, powerless sex slave who used her knowledge of languages to survive. Her story was retold by Bernal Diaz del Castillo in *The Conquest of New Spain*, published in 1568 and by Bernadino de Sahagun in the *The Florentine Codex*, published between 1570 and 1585. Both were widely read in Europe and were well-known accounts of the Spanish conquest of Mesoamerica in the 16th century and helped to create the idea that indigenous women were intermediaries for, and protectors of, European men.

Missing from both of these men’s accounts was the mass rape and sexual exploitation of indigenous women in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies. Catholic priests and monks who operated the hundreds of missions established in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies noted that babies of mixed Native and Spanish parentage (mestizos) were commonly abandoned at churches or monasteries, assumed to be the product of rape. Thousands of others were kept by their mothers, although often this meant rejection from their own people. The number of mestizo children is impossible

to know, but it was enough that in modern-day Mexico, over 80% of the population is a mix of Spanish and Native American.



[Cortez with Malintzin interpreting. From the Florentine Codex, 1570](#) is in the Public Domain

Pocahontas

No other Native woman has experienced more mythology or notoriety than Pocahontas, the daughter of the Powhatan chief who first encountered the English when they landed at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607. Her real name was Amonute, or Matoaka, and she is believed to have been about 10-12 years old when she first met the infamous Captain John Smith. Films and media, most notably Walt Disney's story, shows a much older, physically mature woman who fell in love with Smith and defied her father by protecting him from being killed by her own tribe. This story comes from Captain John Smith's own writings about early Virginia and were likely intended for self-promotion rather than the historical record.

What we do know is that Pocahontas acted as an intermediary between the English at Jamestown and her people, the Powhatan, visiting the fort frequently with food and other supplies. In 1613, during the First Anglo-Powhatan War, Pocahontas was kidnapped by the English in an attempt to force her father to give them weapons and return English prisoners of war. During her time in captivity, she converted to Christianity, changed her name to Rebecca, married John Rolfe, and gave birth to a son, Thomas Rolfe. In 1616, Pocahontas, John, and Thomas traveled to England where she was presented to the court of King James I as the Powhatan Princess. The portrait of her below was created during her time in England, purposely portraying her as a fully English lady, complete with clothing, hairstyle, and white painted face makeup. She died in England in 1617 and John and her son, Thomas, eventually returned to Virginia.

While the facts of her life are often disputed, Pocahontas's 1616 image and myth have become known as the "Indian Princess" archetype. This archetype attempts to paint some Native women as helpers to White men, peacemakers, or leaders due to their relationships to a chief. Malintzin is described in the Codex and by Diaz in similar fashion, showing how early in colonization this image was created and how widespread it became. Other native women who fall under this archetype are Sarah Winnemucca and Sacagawea. The "Indian Princess" further demeans and diminishes indigenous women.



[Matoaka or Rebecca by Simon van de Passe, 1616](#) is in the Public Domain

Assimilation

While the stories of Malintzin and Matoaka were well-known, hundreds of thousands of Native American women were impacted by European conquest and colonization of the Americas over the following centuries. The Spanish and Portuguese transformed South America, the Caribbean, and Mexico, while the English transformed what would become the United States in ways that are still impacting the indigenous population today.

Indigenous women along the Eastern seaboard were integral to their tribes' agricultural economy. They planted, cultivated, and harvested the "Three Sisters" (maize, beans, and squash) as well as prepared and preserved these and other crops for winter. Women were responsible for gathering wild plants, creating herbal medicines, and processing animal hides for clothing. However, once the English created settlements, they introduced new crops such as wheat and barley and new animals such as cattle and horses, which changed the land and impacted the availability of resources the indigenous people relied on. This led many Native women to have to work for English settlers, either in agriculture or domestic service. The English also expected Native men to work the land while the women cared for the homes. Before the English, Native women had engaged in trade, but afterwards, English traders often would not speak to women, thus forcing them even further from their traditional role within the Native economy.

Prior to English colonization, Native women held leadership positions as well. Some communities were matrilineal, such as the Iroquois Confederation, where land and lineage passed through the female line. Women played a key role in decision-making for both the family and the tribal community and they held positions of respect in the community as healers and spiritual leaders, roles that were available to whomever had these gifts, regardless of gender. The idea of women serving as religious or political leaders was an affront to the English, who imposed their patriarchal values on the indigenous population. They refused to recognize Native women as political, economic, or spiritual leaders, leading to many tribes replacing women leaders with men.

Sexual Exploitation and Enslavement

In addition to economic and social disruptions, indigenous women often experienced sexual exploitation, assault, and enslavement at the hands of English colonizers. English men viewed native women as both sexually available and valuable symbols of conquest and dominance. The practice of sexual exploitation of indigenous women started long before the English arrived in the Americas, as Spanish and Portuguese sailors and conquerors (conquistadores) took Caribbean, Mexican, and South American women as concubines, wives, and the spoils of war.

Native American women were also subjected to enslavement. While the Spanish and Portuguese were more infamous for their forced labor systems, English settlers also enslaved Native women, particularly in the southern colonies. Enslaved Native women were often used for agricultural labor or as servants within European households.

Even when not formally enslaved, Native women were forced to conform to the English work ethic, particularly among the Puritans of New England, who enforced their religious beliefs through a legal code called “Blue Laws.” These laws enforced dress codes, church attendance, and Sabbath observance on all who lived within the community, regardless of their personal religious beliefs. Among many indigenous communities, women rested during menstruation, often in a separate building called a “Moon Lodge” where they were cared for by other women. The Moon Lodge was a violation of the Blue Laws and Native women who were caught not working on any day except the Sabbath were punished. It was through the enforcement of Blue Laws and other English laws that indigenous women lost their culture and traditions.

Conclusion

The English colonization of North America in the 1600s profoundly impacted Native American women. They experienced economic displacement, the loss of autonomy, the destruction of traditional gender roles, and the imposition of European patriarchal norms. English colonization also subjected Native women to sexual exploitation and enslavement while reinforcing racial hierarchies that marginalized their status. The combined effects of these forces reshaped Native American societies, leading to long-term consequences that would reverberate for centuries. Native American women not only faced the erosion of their social and economic roles but also endured lasting trauma, both physical and psychological, as a result of English colonialism.

Question to Consider

Why do you think the Indian Princess trope is still so pervasive in the United States?

6. European Women in the British Colonies

Learning Objectives

- Compare the experiences of English women in the New England and Middle colonies with those in the Chesapeake and Southern colonies.
- Evaluate the social, economic, and legal limitations on women during the colonial period.

As we've already learned, women in the English colonies had few legal rights or protections under the law. However, women played an important role in the development of the colonies in what would become the United States. Colonial women managed households and plantations, assisted in their husband's or father's business, and served their communities as midwives and teachers. Furthermore, while all women in the English colonies lived under English law, not all were English and therefore had to navigate language, culture, religious, and legal differences. Finally, their experiences varied from region to region, with the most notable differences being between the Chesapeake and New England colonies.

Life in the Chesapeake

The first continuously occupied English colony in North America was Jamestown, Virginia, settled in 1607 on the banks of the James River just upland from the Chesapeake Bay. The first arrivals were all men and boys, some of whom took Indigenous women, the most famous of which was Pocahontas (see Indigenous Women in the Colonies). It wasn't until 1608 that a supply ship carried two English women to Jamestown and subsequent voyages continued to bring more. However, men outnumbered women in early colonial Virginia 10 to 1, and most English women were either Tobacco brides with arranged marriages or indentured servants (see Women Under English Law). The death rate in Virginia was very high in the first 50 years or so, with most adults not surviving past age 40 and the majority of children dying before the age of five. Thus, family life was very unstable, men and women often married several times because of the death of a spouse and need to care for surviving children. It was not uncommon for a woman to lose over half of her children before their fifth birthday, miscarriages and stillbirths were extremely common, and as many as 1 in 8 women died in childbirth.

Virginia was founded as an economic venture rather than a religious one, with tobacco being its primary export and cash crop, so women were valued for their contributions to the colony's economy. Roughly 3/4 of the women who arrived in Virginia in the early 17th century became indentured servants, usually serving seven-year contracts, which ended with freedom but not much else. Because most women came to Virginia without family and because they were outnumbered by men, the vast majority of women in Virginia were able to choose their husband and were often able to marry fairly well. However, these women were still under English Law, which meant they were expected to be subservient to their husbands, and their husbands were allowed to "discipline" them in whatever way he saw fit, including beating them so long as he did not cause permanent damage.

The Chesapeake region expanded in 1632 to include Maryland, which was founded as a haven for English Catholics

seeking religious freedom from the Church of England. In spite of its religious founding, Maryland developed in a similar fashion to Virginia, cultivating tobacco as a cash crop and using English indentured servants early on before adopting slavery as more Africans were brought to the colonies (see African Women in the Colonies). Women in Maryland experienced similar death rates, child mortality rates, and legal rights as those in Virginia.



The photo above is of the Jamestown Rediscovery Archaeological site, taken by the author in 2024. The crosses in the foreground are a mass grave from the “Starving Time” 1609-1610, when over half of the residents died. The wood framed building in the background near the river is a reconstruction of barracks where the single men lived. Archaeologists have found a large number of artifacts of both English and Indigenous origin in this and several other buildings within the walls of Jamestown fort, which is further evidence that women from neighboring Indigenous communities lived with English men in the early years.

Life in New England

The first English to settle permanently in New England were Puritan Separatists who landed in Massachusetts in 1620, although they were originally bound for Virginia and were blown off course in a storm. We commonly refer to these settlers as “pilgrims” and their landing site as “Plymouth Rock” however, a pilgrim is simply a person who is on a religious journey and they first came ashore on Cape Cod, not Plymouth. In fact, the majority of those who arrived in Massachusetts in 1620 were not Puritans at all but indentured servants or other hired hands, referred to as “strangers” on the passenger list. One major difference between the first settlement at Massachusetts and that of Jamestown was that there were about 20 women on board the Mayflower, most of whom were the wives, daughters, or servants of the men on board. Although men continued to outnumber women in New England for several decades, the proportion was never as severe as it was in Virginia.



The photo above is of “First Landing Beach” in Provincetown, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod, taken by the author in 2025. The Mayflower first landed here, and its passengers disembarked, intending to build shelters, but the weather turned too cold and windy, so they sailed across the bay to Plymouth.

New England was a healthier location for the English than the Chesapeake had been, thanks to a colder climate and cleaner water. Adults typically lived into their 60s, and less than half of children died before the age of five. Because more women traveled to New England as part of a household, family life was far more stable than it was in Virginia. Young women married after consulting with their parents or even grandparents, and more than half of their children survived to adulthood, which strengthened family and community ties. Most importantly, early New England colonies were dominated by the Puritan church.

While technically under English law, early New England communities were effectively a theocracy, led by elders of the Puritan church and their interpretation of the Bible. The Puritans were Christians who believed that the Church of England had not gone far enough in rejecting Roman Catholic practices during the Protestant Reformation. While there were many forms of Puritanism, they were all generally more strict in their practices than other Christians in England. Once in New England, Puritan ministers and elders established the laws and practices of each community and all who lived there, regardless of their religious affiliation. Like most Christians of the time, they were patriarchal, believing that women should be subordinate to men in public life and that wives should be submissive to their husbands in private. However, Puritans believed a wife was to be the “helpmeet” for her husband, helping and supporting him but that her opinions, wants, and needs should be considered in all decisions. Wives were partners, albeit junior partners, within Puritan marriage and were protected by religious law from abuse as well as adultery. While not common, Puritan women could obtain a divorce if their husband was physically abusive or committed adultery. However, any children born of the marriage legally belonged to their father and he was not obligated to grant parental rights to their mother if she chose to divorce him. It can be assumed that most women chose to remain in unhappy and even dangerous marriages simply because they did not wish to leave their children.

Life in the Middle Colonies

Between the New England colonies and the Chesapeake were the Middle or Mid-Atlantic colonies of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware. These were by far the most diverse colonies in terms of nationality, language, culture, and religion. For example, New York was originally founded by the Dutch in 1624 as a trading colony, and people in the area continued to speak Dutch for decades after it was taken by the English. Pennsylvania was founded as a haven for English Quakers (Society of Friends), a Christian sect whose core beliefs included the idea that every person had an “inner light” or a little bit of God in them. This unique belief meant that Quakers essentially believed in equality and pacifism. Women were allowed to speak at Friends’ religious meetings, and by the 18th century, they started anti-slavery societies that would become the cornerstone of the abolitionist movement as well as the women’s suffrage movement. The colony of Pennsylvania allowed religious freedom to all, making it a haven not only for the Society of Friends but other Christians as well as Jews and even those who did not practice religion at all.

Religious Dissenters

With the exception of Pennsylvania, none of the British colonies of North America allowed religious freedom in the early years of their founding, although the diversity of the colonies would necessitate flexibility over time. Men and women who traveled to a particular colony and were not of the dominant religion or held beliefs that differed from those of church leadership risked punishment ranging from prison to death. For women religious dissenters like Anne Hutchinson and Mary Dyer, it was even more dangerous because they were not only challenging religious authorities, they were challenging the male leadership of the colony.

Anne Hutchinson

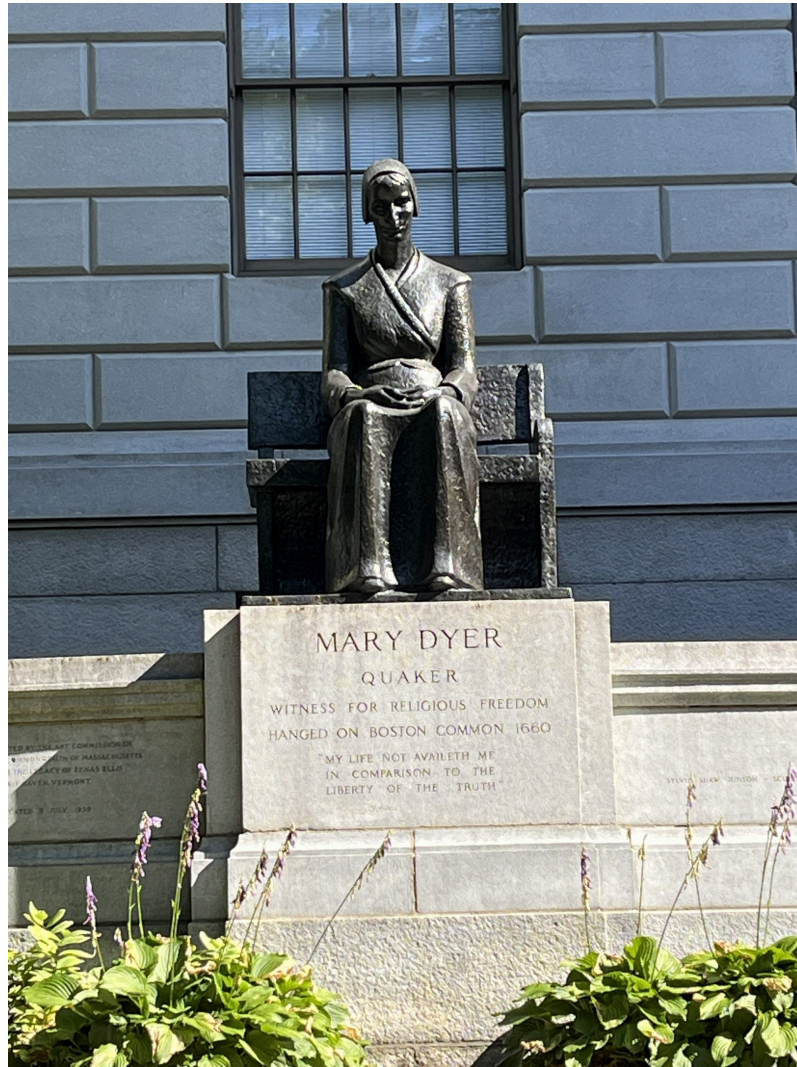
Anne Hutchinson immigrated to Massachusetts Bay colony in 1634 along with her husband and ten children. While Anne was a Puritan, she held some beliefs that challenged the local clergy and in 1636, she opened her home to Bible study for the women of her community, who eventually began bringing their husbands. A woman teaching men was controversial at that time, but it was what she was teaching at her home Bible study classes that eventually drew the attention from Puritan elders who accused her of confusing the faithful. Anne taught that the spirit, or faith in God, would lead someone to salvation rather than good works. Ministers ordered her to stop preaching and when she refused, she was arrested and tried for heresy, slander, and disturbing the peace. Hutchinson defended herself, using scripture and the law, but she was found guilty of heresy and banished from the colony. She moved with her family to Rhode Island, then to New Netherland (now New York), where she and most of her family were killed by Siwanoy in 1643. When news of her death reached Boston, her accusers said it was God’s wrath.

Mary Dyer

Mary Dyer and her husband immigrated to Boston in 1635 and became followers and supporters of Anne Hutchinson. They left Massachusetts Bay with Anne Hutchinson and went to Rhode Island. In 1651, Mary and her husband returned to England, where Mary became a Quaker. She returned to Boston in 1657 and was arrested for harboring heretical views, since Quakerism was considered heresy by the Puritans and it was illegal to be a Quaker in Massachusetts Bay.

colony. Dyer was banished and returned to Boston to preach Quakerism three times before Puritan ministers executed her along with three other Quakers in 1660. She was the first woman executed in the colonies for religious freedom.

Below is a statue of Mary Dyer near Boston Common, taken in 2025 by the author. The inscription reads: Mary Dyer Quaker Witness for Religious Freedom Hanged on Boston Common 1660 “My life not availeth me in comparison to the liberty of the truth.”



Women's Lives in the 17th and 18th Centuries

While regional and religious differences impacted colonial women in a variety of ways, they also had many shared experiences. For example, while Puritans may have granted some protection for wives and Quakers recognized women's equality before God, patriarchy ran the households, the various religious groups, and the government of the English colonies. Women did not have the right to vote and married women could not own property. Household work was divided by gender throughout the colonies, and women were expected to manage the household regardless of where they lived or their socioeconomic status.

Women whose husbands were well-off had servants, indentured servants, or enslaved indigenous or Africans, to

perform the daily tasks of cooking, baking, cleaning, washing, gardening, shopping, and childcare. These women were household managers rather than what we think of today as housewives. Like all women, they worked within whatever budget their husband gave them, and they managed the purchasing of household supplies and furnishings, ensured that the cooking, baking, wash, and other household chores were performed, and oversaw her children's education. If their husband was prominent, she may also be expected to organize social gatherings such as teas and parties, and she may also be expected to manage her husband's affairs in his absence. Since travel took weeks, men were often away from their businesses, farms, and plantations for weeks or months at a time, leaving their wives to manage those as well. For example, Benjamin Franklin spent 16 years in England while his wife managed his printing business in Philadelphia and Abigail Adams, wife of Founding Father John Adams, managed their farm at Braintree, Massachusetts while he was away on government business for most of the years of the American Revolution.

Most White women in the colonies were of middle status, neither very wealthy nor horribly poor. Some may have had servants or slaves to help them, but most could not afford the luxury of only managing the household. Instead, these women worked from sun up to sundown every day for their family's survival. The family wash typically took an entire day, then there was the vegetable garden to tend, food to preserve, eggs to collect, soap to make, meals to prepare, bread to bake, usually while there was a small child underfoot who had to be kept out of the fire. At the end of the day, there was usually clothing to be repaired or sewing to be done. Seasonally, women also carded and spun wool, processed hemp, wove cloth, and smoked meat.



The photo above is a recreated colonial farmhouse at the American Revolution Museum at Yorktown, Virginia, taken by the author in 2024. The small wheeled machine is a spinning wheel, which was operated by a foot pedal that spun the wheel. Women and young girls pulled fibers of wool, cotton, or hemp into the wheel, which spun them into thread. The large machine behind the spinning wheel is a loom on which women wove the thread into cloth by hand. The cloth would then be dyed using a variety of plants depending upon the color desired. The brick fireplace behind the loom is where the women and girls would have prepared the family's meals using a pot that hung over the fire and usually held scraps of meat and vegetables for stews. Coals were scooped from the back to the front of the fireplace in order to cook meat or cornbread in pans. Mothers had to constantly watch for young children who might crawl into the fire. A trick they used was to dress crawling babies in a very long dress that limited their movements and could be stepped on if baby crawled too close to the fire (the root of the saying "Mom put her foot down") or they tied their walking toddler to their apron to keep them from wandering off (the root of the saying "cut the apron strings" when a child is older). The cat in the foreground is Rochambeau and he is living his best life. However, in the colonial period, cats played an important role in keeping rodents out of food stores.

Women in the 17th and 18th centuries married young compared to modern women, typically in their mid to late teens or early 20s. While wealthy families often continued to arrange their children's marriages for family benefit, the colonial period saw the end of most arranged marriages in favor of companionate marriage, which was the idea that a couple should marry on the basis of mutual respect and admiration. Children still expected that their parents would be involved in their choice of spouse, at least to approve them, and parents supervised their daughters strictly during courtship, employing methods like the bundling bag (sewing the boy into a sack) if the couple had to share a bed during a long visit because of distance or inclement weather. However, once betrothed, couples were often allowed more freedom and time alone, which led to the socially tolerated practice of betrothal sex. Based on marriage and birth records, it is believed that approximately 1 in every 4 brides was pregnant on her wedding day.

Once married, women immediately began having children until they entered menopause, on average every 29 months. Birth control was unheard of, although wealthy couples who could afford it had separate bedrooms. For middle- and lower-class women, this meant that while they were performing all of the tasks described above, they were also either pregnant or nursing. Except for very wealthy women, who may have had a wetnurse, women nursed and tended their own children and most women gave birth to at least ten, although not all would survive to adulthood. Daughters were expected to care for younger siblings and help their mother with housework in preparation for when they married and managed their own household. Sons stayed in the house with their mothers until they were old enough to begin farm work or apprentice in their father's occupation. As mentioned earlier, as many as 1 in 8 women died in childbirth, making motherhood extremely dangerous.

Midwives

Although today we think of midwives as people who deliver babies, the term during the colonial period meant far more. A midwife was a woman who had a wide array of medical knowledge and was called upon and trusted by her community to care for those in need. Midwives had knowledge of herbs and plants that were used to treat a variety of ailments, including wound care, headache, and upset stomachs. They were often called upon to set broken bones and perform other kinds of emergency care. Of course, midwives also delivered babies and helped with prenatal and postnatal care. The occupation was typically well respected and was one of the few times when women could expect some payment for their services, although these payments were often "in kind" rather than in cash, and if a patient couldn't pay, they could still expect care.

One of the best known records of midwifery and women's daily lives during the 18th century is the diary of Martha Ballard, who lived from 1735 to 1812. Ballard kept a journal for nearly 30 years, recording births, deaths, illnesses, and

accidents throughout northern Massachusetts (now Maine). She delivered nearly 1,000 babies as well as set bones, treated coughs and colds, and cared for the sick and dying.

Women's Education

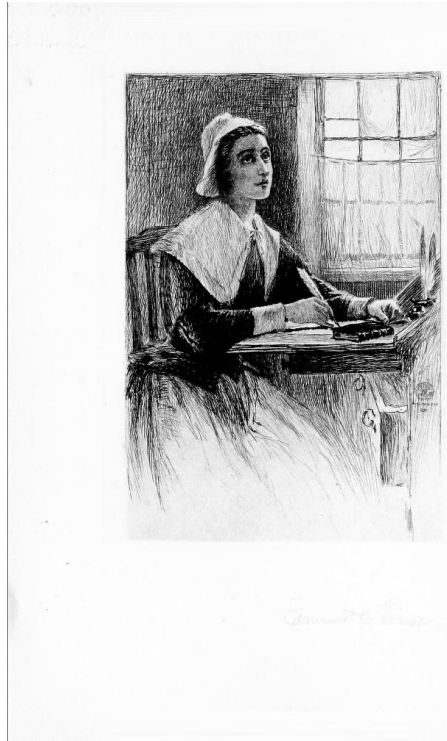
Education for women during the 17th and 18th centuries was not considered a priority. Religious groups such as the Puritans and Quakers believed women should learn to read in order to read the Bible and wealthy families typically taught their daughters to read, but writing was considered a separate skill that women did not need. Nevertheless, a number of colonial women learned to read and write, including Martha Ballard, who left her diary as a treasure trove of information about midwifery and daily life. Women who could write usually used the skill for personal communication, such as letter writing or household record keeping. However, some women used their skills to teach others, and a rare few actually published their work.

The New England colonies highly valued literacy for all children and passed laws requiring communities with over 50 residents to have a school, although the town was left to itself to fund the building and teacher. Consequently, most small towns in New England had Dame Schools, which were operated by a literate woman who was willing to open her home to teach other people's children, usually without pay. Children who attended Dame Schools were taught to read, write, do sums, and memorize Bible verses.

The earliest woman to publish in the English colonies was Anne Bradstreet, who published *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* in 1650. Her poetry and prose explored themes of religion, death, marriage, family, nature, dedications to famous people of her age, even her move to the Americas. Here is a stanza of one of her best loved poems, "Contemplations":

Under the cooling shadow of a stately Elm
Close sate I by a goodly Rivers side,
Where gliding streams the Rocks did overwhelm;
A lonely place, with pleasures dignifi'd.
I once that lov'd the shady woods so well,
Now thought the rivers did the trees excel,

And if the sun would ever shine, there would I dwell. (Bradstreet 1650)



[Sketch of Anne Bradstreet from *The Poems of Mrs. Anne Bradstreet*, 1897](#) is in the Public Domain

Conclusion

European women had an important impact on the development of colonial life. Through women writers like Martha Ballard and Anne Bradstreet, we have an idea of what their daily lives were like and how they may have felt about them. Their hard work on their husbands' farms and businesses helped their families to survive and built communities, towns, and eventually cities that would form a new country.

Question to Consider

Have society's expectations of women, especially mothers, changed much since the 18th century?

7. African Women in the Colonies

Learning Objectives

- Explain the legal distinctions between indentured and chattel slaves.
- Describe how African culture is transformed into African American culture during the colonial period.
- Explain the process and impact of racial mixing in the colonies.

The Colonial period was a time of dramatic transition for all of those living in the British colonies, but it was particularly difficult for the women forced to come to the Americas from Africa between 1619 and 1808, which was the end of the legal slave trade to the United States. African women's experiences varied from colony to colony, depending upon the economy as well as the legal distinction given to Africans by each colonial assembly. Regardless of which of the thirteen British colonies they lived in, African women experienced the intersection of gender, racial, and economic discrimination and were forced to navigate a new world they had not chosen.

Indentured Servitude to Chattel Slavery

In 1619, a Dutch ship arrived in Jamestown, Virginia carrying about 20 Africans, according to the diary of John Rolfe. It is unknown how many women were among this group, but it is known that these people, the first Africans to arrive in what would become the United States, were sold as indentured servants to work for a time before becoming free people under English law. The transformation from indentured servitude to chattel slavery within the thirteen British colonies would be a systematic, legal, and social process that would take nearly a century to complete.

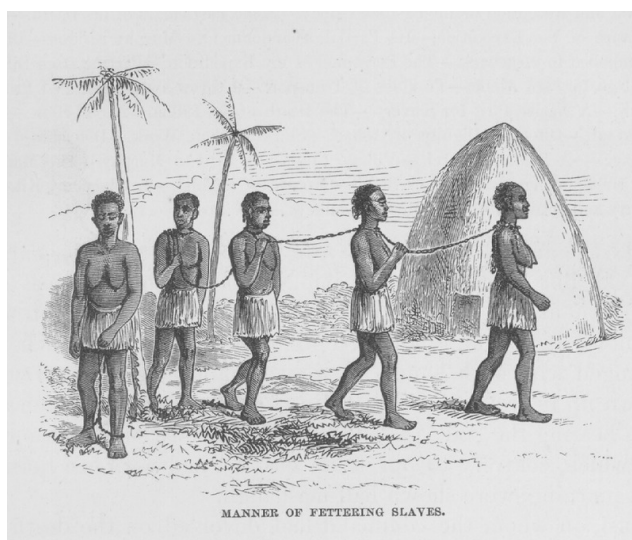


First Africans in Virginia, Parks Marker at Fort Monroe, Virginia, 2024. Photo by author.

The system of indentured servitude already existed in the English colonies by the time the first Africans arrived in 1619, but chattel slavery did not; therefore, the colonists simply incorporated Africans into the system they were already using to secure cheap labor. African men and women who arrived in the colonies from 1619 until the middle of the century were given contracts to work based upon the debt they acquired on the passage from Africa to the English colonies, which was significantly longer than the trip from England. African men typically worked a 7-year contract while African women could expect to work as many as 10 years. As with English men, African men received freedom dues upon the end of their contract, typically some land, clothes, and food to start their new life. African women received nothing but their freedom and the chance to marry, the same as English women. Court records from Virginia in the 1600s indicate that African indentured servants of both genders were able to sue in court when there was a breach of contract and were sometimes awarded their freedom by the court. Once freed, African men and women were legally entitled to the same rights as any free English man or woman. However, by the middle of the 17th century, this began to change and race distinguished rights in the colonies.

The first time in history that legal discrimination against Africans was recorded in colonial law was 1641 in Massachusetts. In this case, the term “stranger” was used to indicate anyone who was not English, based on Leviticus 25:39-55. “Stranger” was understood to mean both Indigenous and African peoples. This court case determined that a “stranger” could be enslaved regardless of whether they were a Christian or not, which broke with the tradition of Christians not enslaving other Christians. Because the colonies had separate legal systems at the time, this court case only applied to Massachusetts colony.

The Massachusetts case was the beginning of a century-long transition from indentured servitude to racial slavery for Africans and their descendants in the British colonies. In 1662, the Virginia colony passed a law that stated that all children born to an enslaved African woman would become a slave for life, regardless of the legal status of the child’s father. The Virginia Slave Code of 1662 also forbid intermarriage between Europeans and Africans, known as miscegenation. After this law was passed, other colonies followed suit so that by the early 18th century, most of the North American British colonies had enshrined inherited chattel bondage of African peoples into their laws.



[Manner of Fettering Slaves](#) is from "Across Africa," Licensed under [CC BY-NC 4.0](#).

African Culture in Transformation

African women who had been brought to the colonies experienced the forced transformation of their culture and gender roles from what they knew in Africa to those of their European enslavers. Most enslaved Africans were from West Africa, where large kingdoms such as Mali traded with North Africa and were heavily influenced by Arab and Muslim traders, and small villages fed the cities using the vast river system of the region. Women dominated agriculture and continued to do so in the Americas, working the tobacco, rice, indigo, and sugar fields, but with African men worked alongside them, which was not common in West Africa and led to the confusion of gender roles within the community. Further, the colonial African population was diverse, speaking many languages, following different religions, and observing different cultures, which required Africans to learn from one another in addition to learning European culture.

In West Africa, women held power within the community as mothers, farmers, and keepers of the culture and history of their people. Once they arrived in the Americas, they learned the languages of their fellow enslaved Africans as well as that of their European enslavers, blending the words and phrases into new languages such as Gullah, which is still spoken on the barrier islands off the Carolinas. They continued to practice African religions and blended them with Christian practices to create entirely new religions, such as Santeria, found on many Caribbean islands and in some areas of the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida today.

An important cultural feature of West Africans was their hair styles. Both men and women wore their hair long and braided, but the styles had meanings ranging from wealth to marital status. Cornrow braids were common amongst nearly all West African peoples and could be intricate or simply straight rows of braids from the front of the face to the nape of the neck. Once they arrived in the Americas, African women continued to wear Cornrows because they kept their hair clean and out of the way while working. Enslaved women often wrapped their hair in turbans as well, although this practice was not as common in West Africa as it would become in the Americas, where it was sometimes required by law.

Sexual Assault and Exploitation

Women who were taken from the West coast of Africa were usually stripped of all clothing and often had their hair cut or shaved by slave traders before being placed in the cargo hold of a ship for their two-month voyage to the Americas, known as the Middle Passage. Once they arrived, African women were not afforded any personal dignity but instead were forced to stand naked on the auction block in front of crowds of men waiting to purchase them. Many of these women had already been raped many times by the members of the ship's crew during the Middle Passage. An enslaved woman could expect to be raped by her enslaver and overseer as well, possibly many times during her lifetime. European men believed it to be their right to have sexual access to their slaves, but this treatment also humiliated the women and encouraged them to obey in order to avoid rape and other violence. European men often justified their sexual assaults on African women by claiming that the women liked it or were asking for it by wearing short skirts (practical for fieldwork) or even claimed that Africans were like animals, without any morality and not deserving of any dignity.

Mulattos, Quadroons, and Octoroons

The rape of enslaved African women often resulted in the birth of children who were mixed race, commonly called mulattos. After the first Virginia Slave Code in 1662, these children would become slaves for life, even though their biological fathers were free white men. If female, these mulatto children could expect to grow up and experience rape just as their mothers had, resulting in the birth of a child who was one quarter African, or quadroon. A female quadroon was still a slave, because her mother had been a slave, and she too could expect to be raped by her owner or overseer, resulting in the birth of a child only one-eighth African, or an octoroon. Mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon were often found in the descriptions of enslaved peoples, either within the plantation slave register or in court records. Eventually, the law would recognize the "one drop law," meaning that a person who had at least one drop of African blood was considered "Black" by law, but often mixed-race people were able to pass for white if they had a light complexion, light eyes, and loose curls or straight hair.

The Case of Sally Hemings

An excellent example of the impact of rape and racial mixing is the family of Sally Hemings, who was enslaved by Founding Father Thomas Jefferson and bore four surviving children by him. There is little official record of Sally or her family, but we do know that Jefferson, while denying that he had a relationship with her, freed all of her children when they reached adulthood. Newspapers of the time discussed their "relationship" and the rumor was even used to attempt to discredit Jefferson when he ran for president. The persistence of the story across the centuries caused Annette Gordon-Reed to investigate the Hemings's story through the historical record, family stories, and DNA to piece together the real story of Sally Hemings and Jefferson in her book, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*. According to Gordon-Reed, Sally's grandmother was raped on the ship that brought her from Africa by a Captain Hemings, which is how the family got their name. Sally's mother had several children, including Sally, with her enslaver, John Wayles, who was Jefferson's father-in-law. Some of the Hemings family came to Jefferson's household when he married Martha Wayles Skelton, John Wayles's daughter and Sally's half sister. It is believed that Jefferson began a sexual relationship with Sally after Martha's death, when he was serving as Ambassador to France and she was caring for his young daughter. Sally became pregnant while in France and chose to return to Virginia with Jefferson, giving birth to several children by him over the next several decades. When each of her children reached the age of 21, they were freed. Two chose to pass as white and move away from Virginia, while the other two remained nearby and took their

mother in when, upon Jefferson's death, his daughter gave Sally "her time," which was not actual freedom. In fact, Sally Hemings was never freed by Jefferson or his daughter and the rest of her family were sold off to pay Jefferson's debts.

It is impossible to know how Sally or her female ancestors felt about the white men with whom they had children, but we know each of them bore children that became more and more white with each passing generation until eventually becoming light enough to pass for white. Even if violent rape was not experienced by Sally or her mother, we must remember that rape and sexual assaults are acts of violence with the intent of controlling another human being, and therefore neither Sally nor her ancestors had the power to refuse their enslavers' advances.

Conclusion

African women endured kidnapping, rape, violence, and loss of freedom during the colonial period as they shifted from the status of indentured servant to chattel slave within the laws of the British colonies. They were forced to adapt their cultures to those of their European owners, forging an entirely unique African American culture. These women navigated the intersection of gender, racial, and economic discrimination in order to ensure their own survival and that of their children.

Question for Consideration

What does the case of Sally Hemings tell us about slavery in the colonies?

8. Witchcraft and Women

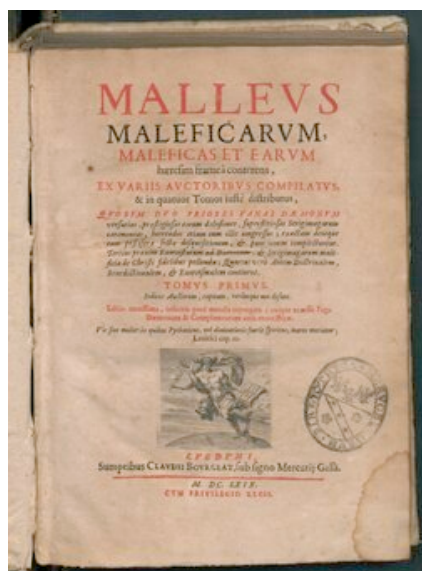
Learning Objectives

- Evaluate why women were more likely to be believed to be witches.
- Analyze the causes and effects of the Salem Witch Trials.

The stories of women falsely accused, imprisoned, and killed for witchcraft have become well-known, the theme of t-shirts sold during Women's History Month, and the internet's "Meme culture." As most of us know, once an idea has reached "meme status" there is misinformation, misunderstandings, and exaggerations that make it difficult to truly understand any issue, particularly one as complicated and nuanced as the witch hysteria. For most people living in the United States, the best-known witch trial happened in Salem, and for many, that is the only one they have heard of. However, the witch trials that occurred in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692 were among the last witch trials, not the first, and they were far from the deadliest.

The idea of witchcraft is quite old, and its definition varies among cultures, from a woman who is simply wise or a healer who uses magic to a woman who uses magic to do harm to others. Witches don't even have to be women, although they usually are. The association of witches as being in league with the devil is what most modern people think of, and in fact, it is the association with evil that caused the witch hysteria that gripped first Europe, then its American colonies and led to the deaths of thousands of women and men.

Malleus Maleficarum



[Malleus Maleficarum, 1669 Edition](#) is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](#)

Most historians trace the deadliest witch hunts and hysteria to the 15th century and the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, written by a German Catholic clergyman named Heinrich Kramer. The book, whose name translates to “Hammer of the Witch,” contains descriptions of how to discover if someone is a witch or if you yourself are being cursed, as well as explanations as to why women are more likely to be witches than men. In the *Malleus*, Kramer argues that women are more likely than men to fall under the influence of the devil because they are weak-minded, easily duped, naturally more carnal, and less connected to God and spirituality than men. Support for his argument comes from Old Testament examples such as the temptation of Eve, the first woman, and the fact that as soon as she herself sins, she tempts Adam to do the same. Women are manipulative, they constantly desire sex, and they cannot be trusted. Furthermore, because women are manipulative and untrustworthy, they will not confess to witchcraft without torture. Kramer described how to torture suspected witches in order to gain a confession and the importance of burning their bodies so that Satan couldn’t reuse it.

While the Catholic Church did not fully support Kramer’s work, it became very popular with some clergy, and its ideas were passed on to lay people through sermons, who then used its ideas to persecute their neighbors, accusing them of witchcraft, trying them, and executing them for the crime. It’s important to note, however, that the 15th and 16th centuries were difficult and chaotic times in Central Europe, where the first witch trials took place. Less than two centuries before, the Black Death had killed one third of the population, and the “discovery” of the Americas had upended deeply held European ideas about their place in the world. Even religion, which had created stability in Europe for over one thousand years, was being challenged through the Protestant Reformation, which split wealthy and poor, urban and rural, and caused further division and mistrust among people. In short, many Europeans were overwhelmed and afraid of the changes happening in their lives and were looking for a scapegoat. Women, particularly those who lived on the margins of society, fit the bill perfectly.

King James I (formerly James XI of Scotland)



[Accused witches kneeling before King James XI of Scotland, from *Daemonologie*, 1597](#) is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License](#)

Witch hysteria continued in Europe after the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, emerging wherever people felt uncomfortable, angry, or someone in power planted the seed. The latter caused one of the largest witch hunts on the British isles in the late 16th century under the leadership of King James XI of Scotland, who would become

the king of Great Britain in 1603. Adding to Kramer's ideas about witchcraft, James wrote his own book about witches, *Daemonologie*, in 1597 after he led the persecution of dozens of women and some men in the North Berwick Witch Trials in 1590-1591. The hysteria was caused by a storm that prevented James's betrothed, Anne of Denmark, from traveling to Scotland so that they could be married. While treacherous weather is common in the North Sea during the winter, James became convinced that his marriage and his life were under threat by witches. Over one hundred women were accused of witchcraft, and after enduring weeks of horrific torture, several of them confessed to spending All Hallows' Eve (Halloween) at a Satanic gathering, during which they copulated with the devil and planned the king's murder. Some of the women implicated others, which led to more arrests, more torture, and more confessions. Many of the women were executed by being strangled, then burned, although at least one was burned alive. Although the North Berwick Witch Trials ended with the execution of a nobleman, James continued to publish about the existence of witches and demons well into his reign as the king of Great Britain.

Salem



Proctor's Ledge in Salem, Massachusetts, is a memorial located at the bottom of Gallow's Hill, where 19 people were hanged for witchcraft in 1692. The 20th victim was pressed to death. All 20 witch trial victims are named on this memorial, but their gravesites are unknown. They were not allowed to be buried in the cemetery because it was considered hallowed ground.

The infamous Salem Witch Trials of 1692 were really a culmination of two hundred years of witch hunts that took place across Europe. Several other colonies, including Virginia, had tried and killed women for witchcraft, but nothing on the scale of what occurred in Salem. By the end of the 17th century, most people of European heritage took for granted that the devil and witches were real, and they blamed any unknown, unfamiliar, or frightening event on evil forces. Like 15th century Europe, Salem was undergoing a series of economic difficulties, including bad weather and harvests, and people were frightened. The first rumblings about witches in Salem began in Reverend Parris's home, when his daughter and niece became ill with a strange ailment that caused the girls to scream and have fits. The doctor could not determine a medical cause, and so, like King James, the unknown and frightening was blamed on witchcraft.

Reverend Parris's daughter and niece were soon joined by several other girls, who also experienced fits and, under intense questioning, claimed that they were being tormented by Tituba, who was a West Indian slave in the Parris household. The fact that a woman of color is the first to be accused should not be a surprise considering servants and other poor women were often the first to be accused in other witch trials, including those in Scotland. Tituba was beaten severely, which resulted in her confession of being a witch, along with several other women in Salem. Sarah Goode and Sarah Osborne, two poor women who were not well liked in town, were accused next, along with Bridget

Bishop, a midwife. These and more than 150 women and men were tried for witchcraft, while several hundred others were accused and imprisoned, some for years. You can read the full transcripts of more than one hundred of those tried at the link below.

[Salem Witch Trials Transcripts, 1692](#)

After reading just one or two of the trial transcripts, it's clear that those accused of witchcraft were already believed to be guilty, and no matter what their answers to the questions were, they were likely to be convicted anyway. Most of the accused women had little power or say within their community, although a few, including Rebecca Nurse, were highly respected. Five of those executed were men, most of whom had a relationship with an accused woman. Giles Corey, for example, refused to answer questions about his wife Martha's involvement in witchcraft, and so he was pressed to death as a form of torture in hopes of getting him to confess. Reverend George Burroughs was accused of being the ringleader of the Salem witches and sentenced to hang. Before he was killed, he recited the Lord's Prayer perfectly, which was something a witch was not supposed to be able to do. He was hanged anyway. The Salem Witch Trials eventually ended when wealthy people, including the governor's wife, were accused, and the governor ordered the court abolished. By then, 20 people had been executed, and several died awaiting trial. They were the last victims of the witch trials in the British American colonies.

Why Witchcraft?

Historians have proposed a variety of reasons for the witchcraft hysteria that gripped Europe and its colonies from the 15th to the 17th centuries. Superstition and religious fanaticism are often the chief culprits, but feminists have noted that the majority, about 80%, of those accused of witchcraft during the hysteria were women. Women had little access to education, no political power, and no economic independence during this time. Essentially, women were fully at the mercy of men, and it was men, like Heinrich Kramer and King James, who were able to write their own narrative about women. They concluded that women were immoral, untrustworthy, manipulative, and easily manipulated, thus making them easy targets for the devil. Because women were not in a position to challenge these ideas, they were believed, often even by women themselves.

In addition to women's morality, women's potential political and economic power could make them vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft. Many of the women accused of witchcraft throughout Europe as well as during the North Berwick and Salem Witch Trials were midwives, which gave them a great deal of power over life and death as well as some economic independence, since this was one of the few occupations where women could earn money. In some communities where witch hysteria took hold, women accused of witchcraft stood to inherit property because there was no man to inherit, which put them in the precarious position of challenging men's economic power. In Salem, for example, Elizabeth Proctor was accused of witchcraft by neighbors with whom she had an economic feud. Her husband, John, was accused when he staunchly defended his wife.

Conclusion

The witch hysteria, which lasted for over 200 years and took the lives of thousands, was caused by a number of issues, including religion and economic stress and rivalry, but the fact that 80% of those accused were women cannot be ignored. Women without power, like servants and slaves, made easy scapegoats for a community experiencing natural disasters, but women who could potentially wield power, like midwives and feme soles, were equally vulnerable to

economic rivalries or religious fanaticism. Women seemed to be viewed as the real enemy of the communities who tried and executed them, and perhaps that is what “meme culture” is reminding us of.

Question to Consider

How have modern women used the stories of the witch trials for empowerment?

9. Revolutionary Women and Republican Motherhood

Learning Objectives

- Identify some of the important women known for service during the American Revolution.
- Describe the ways in which women participated in the American Revolution.
- Analyze the impact of the Revolution on women in the young United States.

Founding Mothers

The American Revolution created the United States of America. It created a new system of government, based on both new State Constitutions and the Federal Constitution. For most Americans, names like Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and George Washington are synonymous with early United States history and have become known as the Founding Fathers. But what about the Founding Mothers of the United States?

Protesters, Activists, and Survivors

Before and during the American Revolution, women, like men, actively participated in protests against Great Britain. Frustrated by taxes they viewed as unfair, men and women took to the streets to demonstrate their anger, the Sons of Liberty going so far as to destroy tea by throwing it into Boston Harbor in 1774 in the famous Boston Tea Party. Affiliated with the Sons of Liberty was a group of women who called themselves the Daughters of Liberty. This group of women, who were unable to vote or hold political office in the colonies, used their purchasing power within the household to boycott British goods, such as tea, organized public marches to protest taxes on many household goods, and actively recruited men and women to join their cause. Most of these women were working class, and public demonstrations involving women at this time were very controversial. Abigail Adams, wife of the author of the Declaration of Independence John Adams, agreed with the Daughters of Liberty in theory but mentioned her disdain for their public displays in letters to her husband and friends.

While public demonstrations were controversial, community activity and work were more socially acceptable. Wealthy women organized social gatherings and even went door to door collecting money for the Continental Army. George Washington himself publicly commended the Ladies' Aid Society of Philadelphia, founded by Esther Reed, for their fundraising efforts to support his army at Valley Forge. Women from all walks of life and levels of society organized sewing circles to help make and repair uniforms, socks, gloves, coats, and blankets for the soldiers, who were often wintering in very cold, brutal conditions. Women commented in their diaries and in their letters that they felt "patriotic" by spinning, weaving, and sewing for the soldiers.

Most women who lived through the American Revolution were simply trying to survive it, keep their children fed, and their families intact. As the British and Continental armies and various colonial militias traveled the countryside, they took crops and livestock, burned homes and barns, and destroyed fields under the feet of horses and men. Battles took place on farms and in small villages, where women and children lived and had to clean up the mess of wounded and dead soldiers and animals once the armies moved on. Even if they were fortunate enough not to encounter battles or armies, women had to fill in for absent husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons on farms, shops, and businesses throughout the country. Many men commented in letters and diaries their concerns about leaving their wives to fend for themselves. Yet, as the war raged on, those same men recognized that their wives were quite capable of running businesses and farms in their absence. John Adams complimented his wife Abigail's managing of the farm and children several times in letters throughout the war.

Camp Followers and Soldiers

Women were not allowed to serve as soldiers in the Continental Army or in the colonial militias, but they were able to act as nurses, cooks, washerwomen, and prostitutes to the soldiers. Collectively referred to as “camp followers,” these women, numbering in the hundreds, were sometimes related to soldiers or officers, following their husbands or sons into the army to care for them away from home. Others saw war as an opportunity to earn money to support themselves and their families. Many officers wrote letters and dispatches referring to camp followers, often derisively, describing them as low, slovenly, swearing, whorish women. While some certainly were prostitutes, many more were caring for their male family members or wanted to do something to support the Patriot cause. A great example of this was Polly Cooper, an Oneida woman who was sent to Valley Forge to help Washington's army in the winter of 1777-78. Skilled in cooking and medicine, Cooper brought a large amount of white corn to feed the army and taught the soldiers and other camp followers how to prepare it. She also used her skills in healing to treat the soldiers and relieve their suffering. While Polly Cooper came to Valley Forge of her own free will, many who followed the army were enslaved to soldiers and officers. Hannah Till, for example, was enslaved to General George Washington. She and her husband cooked and cared for the general through the harsh winter at Valley Forge. A few months later, the Tills earned enough money to purchase their freedom. They continued to serve Washington and the Marquis de LaFayette as paid servants through the remainder of the war. While most women who lived with the Continental Army were camp followers, a few chose to take up arms, either in their husband's place or as soldiers in their own right. It's unknown how many women took up arms, but we know of a few.

Margaret Cochran Corbin

Margaret Corbin was a camp follower whose time with the Continental Army began when her husband, John, enlisted as an artilleryman for the 1st Pennsylvania in 1775. Like most women, she prepared food, did laundry and sewing, and brought water to the soldiers on the battlefield (women who carried water were often referred to as Molly Pitcher), living in camp alongside her husband, his fellow soldiers, and many other women camp followers. In November, 1776, at the Battle of Fort Mifflin, John Corbin was killed and Margaret took his place, loading the cannon for the rest of the battle, even through wounds to her left arm, chest, and jaw. The fort was taken by the British and Margaret was captured, cared for by British doctors, and was returned to the Patriots along with other prisoners of war. After a few months of recovery, she was sent to live with the Invalid Regiment at West Point, where she remained for the rest of her life. On July 6, 1779 she became the first woman in American history to receive a pension for her military service.

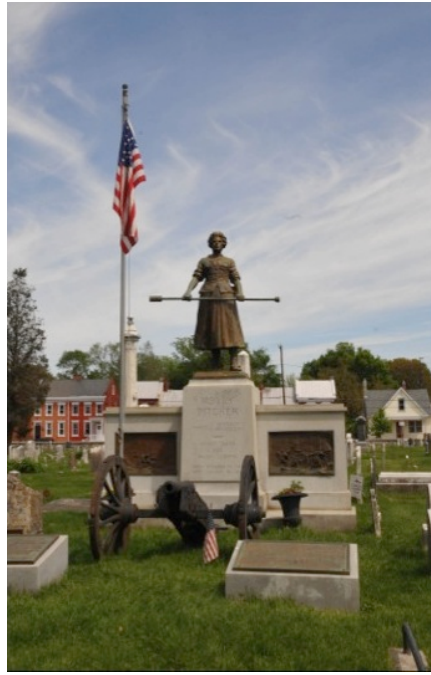


[Grave and Memorial of Margaret Corbin at West Point Military Cemetery](#) by [Ahodges7](#) is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported](#)

Mary Ludwig Hays McCauley

Another most famous camp follower of the Revolution was Mary Hays and she joined her husband in Washington's winter camp at Valley Forge to care for him during the brutal winter. The following July, 1777 found Mary and her husband, John, at the Battle of Monmouth where she was carrying water to the men during the fighting. During the battle her husband, an artilleryman, fell, either from a wound or heat exhaustion is unknown, and Molly took his place, continuing to help load and fire the cannon throughout the afternoon, even going so far as to have an enemy cannon shot pass between her legs and tear her skirts. She continued loading and firing the cannon.

Her story was actually recorded in several memoirs of soldiers after Monmouth, but notably, it was also recognized by George Washington himself. The evening after the Battle of Monmouth, the general had heard about Molly's service and made her a noncommissioned officer. She was known as Sergeant Molly after that.



[Grave of Molly Pitcher](#) by [Jerry & Roy Klotz, MD](#) in 2015 is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International](#)

Deborah Sampson Gannet

While women were not allowed to serve in the Continental Army, we know that several women served disguised as men. Usually when they were discovered, they were dishonorably discharged and presumably went home. However, Deborah Sampson's story was remarkably different. She joined the army as Robert Shirtliff and served for a year and a half, participating in several battles. At Tarrytown, New York she was shot in the thigh and slashed across the forehead with a saber. Sampson was taken to the hospital where she was treated for her head wound but left before the doctor could treat her leg. She later removed the musket ball from her leg herself with a penknife. Deborah continued to serve in the Continental Army until she became ill with a fever and, when she passed out, her doctor discovered that she was female. He reported her to her commanding officer, who discharged her with enough money to return home.

Deborah Sampson later married Benjamin Gannet, had three children, and lived for years in rural Massachusetts as a farmer's wife. Her story *The Female Review: or, Memoirs of a Young Lady* was written by Herman Mann in 1797 and in 1802 she began a speaking tour during which she recounted her life during the American Revolution, often wearing her military uniform. In 1792, Massachusetts granted her a soldier's pension and in 1818, she applied for a pension from the Federal government because "She is in such reduced circumstances, as to require the aid of country for her support-." Her petition was granted, making her only the second woman to receive a soldier's pension from the U.S. government, alongside Margaret Corbin.



[Deborah Sampson, 1797](#) from the Massachusetts Historical Society is in the Public Domain

Writing the Revolution

The American Revolution itself was an event that began with ideas espoused during the Enlightenment, which began in the 17th century in Europe and included such notable philosophers as Voltaire and John Locke, whose ideas about natural rights and the role of the government in protecting them would be integrated into the Declaration of Independence. However, while Voltaire, Locke, and other “enlightened” philosophers were discussing the natural rights of man, a few women philosophers noted that while governments were tyrannical over men, men were tyrannical over women. Some of these women, like Mary Astell, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Judith Sargent Murray, published their works and opened the public discourse on what equality meant for women at a time when patriarchy ran the western world. Others, like Abigail Adams, kept her ideas about equality limited to the letters she wrote to her husband, John, while he was working to create the United States. Still others like Phyllis Wheatley and Mercy Otis Warren, did not directly challenge men in their writings, but their very existence as published authors was in itself a challenge to the patriarchal narrative.

Mary Astell

Born in England in 1666, Mary Astell is considered the Great Britain’s first feminist writer. Although she lacked a formal education, Astell wrote several books and pamphlets arguing that women were as able to reason and learn as men. Her first work, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, was published anonymously in 1694 and criticized the lack of education for women of her time and advocated for the establishment of a woman’s college for religious education. She added a second part to the book in 1697, *Wherein a Method is Offer’d for the Improvement of Their Minds*, in which she argued that controlling emotions was key to attaining truth. Astell’s third book, *Reflections Upon Marriage*, was published in 1700 and challenged the marriage customs of her day. She argued that marriage was essentially female servitude and criticized that education for women only prepared them to be wives and mothers. Her book actually discourages

women from marriage, arguing that they would be better off single, as she was, in order to pursue their own education and happiness. Putting her ideas into action, Mary Astell founded a school for girls in 1709. Although the vast majority of women could not read her writings, they went on to inspire other feminist writers, including Mary Wollstonecraft.

Mary Wollstonecraft

In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In it, she openly challenged Enlightenment philosophers' perspective that women are inferior to men, arguing instead that this is simply how men wish to see women and she encouraged women to reject men's perspectives about them. Like Mary Astell, Wollstonecraft argued that women should have the same access to education that men did because they were just as capable of reasoning. Additionally, she argued that women should become financially independent and rejected the idea that women should depend upon men for support. In 1798, Wollstonecraft published a novel, *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman* in which she continued to present her ideas about women's equality with men through the experiences of her female characters. Like Astell, she founded a school for girls but unlike her, she was romantically involved with several men, having a daughter out of wedlock before marrying William Godwin and giving birth to a second daughter, Mary, who went on to write *Frankenstein*. By the time of her death in 1797, the American Revolution was complete but her writings would continue to inspire women to question their place in society.

Judith Sargent Murray

In the new country that was being created in North America, Judith Sargent Murray noted how very much like the old world it still was. Born to a merchant family with a vast library, Judith was fortunate to have access to books on a variety of subjects. However, like most women of her time, she was denied access to a formal education, a fact that she resented and returned to in her writings often. Her first husband died, leaving her a widow without the means to support herself, another fact that added to her frustration with the patriarchal times she lived in. Judith was a member of the Universalist Church, which believed in equality of souls, and eventually married a minister. It was because of the inequality she experienced in her life that she wrote *On the Equality of the Sexes* in 1790.

On the Equality of the Sexes was an essay criticizing the way society itself treated men and women differently, arguing, much as Wollstonecraft did in 1792, that women were not inherently inferior to men but that society had limited women's opportunities through limiting their access to education and thus to self-determination. On the second page of her essay she asks, "But, suffer me to ask, in what the minds of females are so notoriously deficient, or unequal. May not the intellectual powers be ranged under these four heads — imagination, reason, memory and judgment?" (Murray 1790, 2) She goes on to argue that if women were educated in the same way that men were, equality would follow quickly. Judith Sargent Murray connected her ideas about women's equality to men with the ideals of the American Revolution and particularly the idea of natural rights as supposed in the Declaration of Independence. Her ideas would help lead the country to expand education for women in the early 19th century using the ideal of Republican Motherhood, or the idea that women should be educated in order to raise good (male) citizens who can vote and participate in politics.



[*Judith Sargent Murray by John Singleton Copley, c. 1770*](#) is in the Public Domain.

Abigail Adams

Perhaps the best known woman of the Revolutionary period is Abigail Adams, wife of John Adams, co-author of the Declaration of Independence and second president of the United States. Our knowledge of Abigail comes from an unlikely source, herself, because she and John wrote hundreds of letters to one another throughout their marriage, which was often spent apart because of John's political career. More importantly, nearly all of their letters survive and are available for historians to study. What we see is a couple that formed a partnership based on mutual respect and love.

The best known and most often quoted of Adams's letter is referred to as the "Remember the ladies" letter. Written over the course of several weeks in 1776, when John was in Philadelphia writing the Declaration of Independence, Abigail writes about the unrest in Massachusetts, a smallpox outbreak, and the family. She also writes about politics and women's rights.

"I long to hear that you have declared an independency — and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation." (Adams March 31, 1776)

Interestingly, she used the argument that the men of the colonies had been making against Great Britain to support her perspective on women's rights, that of representation. Most people are familiar with the cry of the American Revolution, "No taxation without representation!" Here, Abigail is arguing that women lack representation and should not be bound by laws that they have no voice in creating. This is the exact same argument that men like John Adams was making as a defense for declaring independence from Britain in 1776. Her argument about not putting unlimited power into the hands of husbands echoes Mary Astell's arguments about marriage. Abigail's letters were written to and for an audience of one, her husband, but they serve as a window into what some women during the Revolution were hoping to achieve when the country created a new government.



[Abigail Adams by Gilbert Stuart, c. 1810](#) is in the Public Domain

Phillis Wheatley

Taken from Senegal, West Africa as a young girl, Phillis Wheatley was purchased by John Wheatley of Boston, who initially put her to work as a domestic servant until he realized how intelligent she was. Soon, young Phillis was studying Latin, Greek, Astronomy, History, and literature, among other subjects, alongside Wheatley's children. By the age of 13, she was writing poetry and Wheatley tried unsuccessfully to get her works published in the colonies. They were successful in Great Britain and in 1773 Phillis Wheatley published *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Her poetry was popular both in Great Britain and in the colonies, where she continued to write throughout the Revolution. Her best known poem, *On Being Brought from Africa to America*, is a reminder to White Christians that Africans must be included within Christianity:

Tw'as mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train. (Wheatley 1773, p. 3)

Phillis Wheatley wrote several poems during the Revolution and after, praising the new country in its fight for freedom and liberty. Several of her poems were published in newspapers, including a letter to Reverend Occom in 1774 in which she is openly critical to slavery: "Otherwise, perhaps, the Israelites had been less solicitous for their Freedom from Egyptian Slavery: I don't say they would have been contented without it, by no Means, for in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our modern Egyptians I will assert that the same Principle lives in us." (Wheatley 1774). Modern scholarship has found that she was active in Boston's early anti-slavery movement and she herself was manumitted by the Wheatley family in 1774, just before Mrs. Wheatley's death. Phillis continued to write and publish until her death in

1784. She was the first published African American poet in the United States.

Mercy Otis Warren

While women have historically been missing from the narrative about the American Revolution, one of its first histories was written by a woman, Mercy Otis Warren. Warren published *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* in 1805, becoming one of the first American women to publish a non-fiction book. She exchanged letters with John Adams and was associated with the most notable Founding Fathers thanks to her husband, James Warren, who belonged to the Continental Congress. Warren wrote plays and published a book of poems, making her only the third woman, after Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley, to do so.

Indigenous Women Political Liaisons

Most women in the colonial era and during the Revolution had no official political voice or power at all, except when exercising the power of the purse in boycotting or taking to the streets in protest. However, Indigenous women still retained some political power within their respective tribes and they used that power to negotiate treaties and navigate the delicate political balance between their tribes, the British, and the new United States.

Konwatsi'tsiaienni (Mary/Molly Brant)

Known to both the British and the American colonists as Mary (Molly) Brant, Konwatsi'tsiaienni was a leader of the Mohawk people of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy). Before strains between Britain and its colonies started, Brant attended negotiations with the colonists over the rights of her people to keep their land on the eastern Great Lakes. By the time of the Revolution, she was well known and respected by both colonists and the British as well as her people, and continued to act as a leader and liaison to the British. She married William Johnson, Britain's Superintendent of Indian Affairs in the region and she was skillful and valuable in navigating both cultures, even after he died in 1774. While the women we have included in this section so far have all been Patriots, Konwatsi'tsiaienni and her people sided with the British during the Revolution and she was able to acquire supplies through trade to help her people, especially after the Patriots burned their villages and crops. Her brother, Joseph Brant, led Mohawk warriors into battle alongside British troops and his sister, Molly organized their supplies and food. After the war ended with a British loss, Brant was able to negotiate safety for her people in Canada.

Nanye'hi (Nancy Ward)

Nanye'hi was a Cherokee War Woman who married a white man, Bryant Ward, and became known as Nancy Ward. She became a War Woman during a battle with the Creeks, but retained the title for the rest of her life, as was customary. Like the Mohawk, the Cherokee sided with the British during the Revolutionary War and they suffered brutal attacks from the Patriots as a result. Unlike the Haudenosaunee, whose lands bordered British Canada, allowing them to escape, Cherokee lands were in the middle of the new United States. When the war ended, the Cherokee were forced to sign the Treaty of Hopewell, giving some of their lands to the new country. Nanye'hi was at the negotiation of the treaty

and seemed to recognize that the lives of Cherokee women were about to change: “You know that women are always looked upon as nothing. We are your mothers, you are our sons.” Our cry is all for peace . . . Let your women’s sons be ours, our sons be yours.” (Nancy Ward 1785). Through the rest of her life, Nancy saw more Cherokee lands ceded and the continued loss of power for Cherokee women.

The Fate of Slavery

The American Revolution did not end the institution of slavery. While individual enslaved people, such as Phillis Wheatley and Hannah Till became free through manumission or purchasing themselves, most enslaved Americans remained in bondage after the war ended, regardless of whether they supported the Patriot or British causes during the war. However, some of the northern colonies began abolishing slavery when the war ended, either immediately or gradually. They were helped along by some enslaved people who chose to legally challenge the idea of slavery in court. One such woman was Elizabeth Freeman.

Elizabeth Freeman (Mum Bett)

Known as Mum Bett while she was enslaved, Elizabeth Freeman won her freedom in 1781 in a Massachusetts courthouse. She and her younger sister spent over thirty years enslaved to Pieter Hogboom and then John Ashley. However, when she heard a public reading of the Declaration of Independence, she began to wonder why “all men are created equal” didn’t apply to her. In May, 1781 Elizabeth sought help from Theodore Sedgwick, who was a known abolitionist and attorney, who agreed to file a suit on behalf of herself and an enslaved man named Brom, to force John Ashley to free them. When Ashley refused to comply, Brom and Bett v. Ashley went before the county court, where a jury found in their favor and required John Ashley to free them and pay them 30 shillings each. The case established legal precedent for other enslaved people in Massachusetts to sue their enslavers for their freedom and many of them did. In 1783, the state of Massachusetts abolished slavery.



[Portrait of Elizabeth Freeman, age 70 by Susan Anne Ridley Sedgewick, c. 1812](#) is in the Public Domain.

Most enslaved people were not as fortunate as Elizabeth Freeman, Phillis Wheatley, or Hannah Till. Some who had supported the British during the war were able to flee to Canada and some were even taken to Africa by the British navy. The vast majority remained in the United States, which did not abolish slavery until 1865.

Republican Motherhood

War usually transforms societies and cultures, and the American Revolution was no exception. While the 13 states rewrote their constitutions and eventually the country would, too, none afforded women any more political power than they had before the war. Women could not vote, even in local elections, for more than a century, and most could still not own property. However, there was a fundamental shift in the attitude towards women and their role in the new country. This shift has come to be known as Republican Motherhood.

Republican Motherhood was the idea that women, especially in their role as mothers, should be educated. While women like Astell, Wollstonecraft, and Murray argued that women should have access to an education for their own benefit, the men of the new country saw a different purpose. The state and national constitutions allowed property owning males to vote, and a few states allowed all free men to vote. This meant that men would need to be educated in order to become good citizens and make wise decisions for the Republic. Who better to educate them than their mothers?

In the decades following the American Revolution, public schools for both boys and girls expanded throughout the United States, and female seminaries were founded to teach young women domestic skills and civics, eventually leading to women replacing men as teachers in the new public school system that was expanding across the country. Books extolling the virtues of the women of the republic created images of mothers raising sons to become great leaders. Mason Weems, in his biography of George Washington, praised his mother, Mary Ball Washington, as a virtuous, educated woman who raised a virtuous, educated citizen. Women's education was viewed as a way to strengthen the

republic. Women, however, would use their access to education to expand their influence on society and gain new rights during the 19th century.

Conclusion

The American Revolution created a new country, the United States, and was founded on principals such as natural rights and equality. However, women were not included in the idea that “all men are created equal” even though they fought, raised money, and suffered deprivations for the cause. Men did gain new respect for women because of their service during the war, but it would take more than another century for women to have the same political rights as men after the Revolution.

Question to Consider

Why do you think men didn't consider women as having natural rights or deserving of a political role in the new country?

PART III

ANTEBELLUM WOMEN AND THE CIVIL WAR (1800-1865)

10. Cult of Domesticity

Learning Objectives

- Define and explain the four pillars of True Womanhood.
- Explain how the Mosher Survey of the late 19th century assists historians in understanding the concept of “purity” in the Victorian Era.
- Explain the role of the media and social pressure in conforming women to True Womanhood.

The time period between the Revolution and the Civil War is often referred to as the Antebellum period, meaning the time or era between the wars. It is a time of tremendous change as the United States grows from 13 states located East of the Mississippi River to more than 30 states stretching to the Pacific Ocean. Arguments over the future of slavery divided Americans North and South and eventually exploded into the most destructive war in U.S. history, the Civil War. Economically, the country entered the Industrial Revolution, which began in Great Britain in the 18th century but spread across the Atlantic, moving production from homes to factories, moving people from rural to urban communities, and further stratifying society by expanding the Middle Class and its influence. As the country expanded westward, people moved with it, removing the indigenous populations they saw as a barrier to their domination, and taking with them enslaved people who had no choice in the matter. It is within this dynamic era that women recreate ideas about womanhood and begin to transform their roles within society.

Following the American Revolution, women worked to create a different role for themselves in society, one that focused on their influence as wives and mothers. Beginning with Republican Motherhood, women argued that they should have access to education in order to be better mothers to the next generation of American men. Further, women also began to argue that their inherently feminine traits were a benefit to their families and that the household was the cornerstone of American culture and society. Out of these arguments came the ideal historians refer to as the Cult of Domesticity or the Cult of True Womanhood. Simply put, the Cult of Domesticity glorified the woman's realm, the home, and placed mothers on the highest pedestal of womanhood, held in place by the four pillars of True Womanhood: Piety, Purity, Domesticity, and Submission.

Piety

In simplest terms, piety refers to dedication to God and His work; therefore, a pious woman has faith in God and behaves in a manner that is pleasing to God. She attends church, Bible studies and is active in her church community, perhaps by teaching Sunday School or collecting money for the poor. Before the American Revolution, women were often encouraged to learn to read so that they could read the Bible, and this encouragement continued during the Antebellum period, as women were encouraged to be the moral compass for their families. Although women were not allowed to become ministers in most religions, church work was considered an appropriate public space for women and women would go on to use the pillar of piety to defend their activities in social reform movements such as abolition, temperance, and suffrage.



Preparing for Church.

[Preparing for Church](#) from Godey's Lady's Book, 1854 is in the Public Domain.

Purity

Closely related to piety is purity, or the idea that a woman should remain sexually pure until marriage and sexually loyal to her husband during marriage. Beginning in the Antebellum period, sometimes referred to as the Victorian Age after Great Britain's Queen Victoria, the idea of purity took on a more extreme meaning, that of a woman's "passionlessness" or lack of any sexual feelings whatsoever.

Unlike the Colonial period, when it was believed that women were just as interested in sex as men, Antebellum society developed the belief that women were not sexual beings. Women were taught that sex was something to be endured rather than enjoyed, for the sake of becoming a mother, which elevated her to the pinnacle of womanhood. Men, on the other hand, were sexual beings and physically needed sex. The biological differences between men and women necessitated differences in sexuality as well.

The fact that women took the message of purity to heart during the 19th century is evident in the premarital pregnancy rate, which was far lower than that of the Colonial period. During the 18th century, men and women were expected to wait until marriage to have sex, but premarital relations were tolerated so long as the couple was engaged. This practice was referred to as Betrothal Sex and was so common that one in three brides were pregnant on their wedding day during the Colonial period. By contrast, only about 10% of brides were pregnant during the Antebellum period. Birth control was unreliable at best and deadly at worst during this time, which suggests that women were abstaining from premarital sex far more during the Antebellum period than they had the previous century (Gardner 2007).

The Reality of Purity: The Mosher Survey

In the 1890s, Dr. Clelia Duel Mosher, while attending Stanford University, conducted a number of studies regarding women's health and hygiene. Dr. Mosher studied several dozen women from age 30-50s, surveying them about a variety of taboo topics ranging from menstruation to orgasms. Her goal was to disprove many of the beliefs regarding women's sexual health that were widely held by 19th-century male doctors.

Dr. Mosher began by studying the idea that women and men breathed differently, thus causing men to be more intelligent and physically fit than women. Male doctors commonly believed that women breathed using their upper chests while men breathed using their diaphragms, an observation that turned out to be correct. However, Dr. Mosher proposed that women used their upper chests to breathe due to the constrictions of their clothing, specifically corsets, which had been commonly worn throughout the 19th century, and "Hobble skirts," which were tight-fitting and difficult to move around in. Thus, she proved that women breathed differently than men, not because they were women, but because of their clothing.

Eventually, Dr. Mosher would survey dozens of women in the San Francisco, California area, asking them a variety of questions regarding menstruation, sexual interest, sexual encounters, frequency of sex, and details about orgasms. It is worth noting that the surveys were completed, despite all of the surveyed women being raised with the idea that women are to be passionless and pure. The survey results yielded some expected results but also some that were quite shocking. For example, most of the women surveyed admitted that they knew nothing or very little about sex before their wedding night. However, they indicated that they believed sex was not simply for reproduction but also served the purpose of bonding a husband and wife and relieving stress. Most women also said that they had had at least one orgasm, although most also indicated that they rarely had them. Upon further study of the results, Mosher concluded that women knew very little about their own bodies; therefore, they could neither understand what gave them pleasure nor communicate this with their husbands.

The Mosher Survey was the largest survey of its kind until the 1920s and is notable not only for the fact that it was conducted by a female doctor but also for the fact that its subjects were open and honest with their responses. This suggests that women likely had honest conversations about their sexuality and reproduction with one another, but that men, who were the record keepers of the day, were rarely privy to them. Women had internalized the messages of their childhood regarding purity and understood the importance of showing, at least to society, that they were following the rules. In fact, Dr. Mosher never published the survey herself; it was published more than 30 years after her death in 1940.



[Dr. Clelia Duel Mosher, 1892](#) is in the Public Domain.

Domesticity

During the Antebellum period, the economy of the United States changed dramatically and this led to a change in the way society viewed the home and women's place within it. Throughout most of human history, the home and workplace were one and the same, whether it was a farm, blacksmith shop, or other business, families lived and worked together in the same space. The Industrial Revolution, which began in the late 18th century, changed this dynamic and created the idea of two spheres, a public and private one. The public sphere was the world of men and involved business and politics while the private sphere was the world of women and involved peace and morality. Thus the third pillar of True Womanhood, domesticity, meant far more than the endless drudgery of housework from morning til night. Rather, domesticity referred to women's role as homemaker, peace keeper, and moral compass for the family.

Submission

The final pillar of True Womanhood, submission, was connected to both the legal and social status of women during the Antebellum period. As with the Colonial period, women were legally defined as either Feme Sole, legally autonomous, or Feme Covert, legally covered by a male relative. Therefore, the concept of submission applied to a woman's relationship to a man, such as her husband, father, or brother, and she submitted her will to his in all things because he is the head of the family. However, submission did not mean that she was powerless in the relationship; she could wield considerable influence over her menfolk due to her piety and purity.

The media of the time period often contained stories, poetry, prose, and the like that instructed women on the appropriate level of influence they could wield over their male relatives. An example is *The Lady's Amaranth*, published in 1838 by Joseph Torr: "The man bears rule over his wife's person and conduct. She bears rule over his inclinations: he

governs by law, she by persuasion.... The empire of woman is the empire of softness...her commands are caresses, her menaces are tears.” (Torr 1838)

While the above quote recognized the legal power of husbands over wives during the Antebellum period, it equally recognized that a wife should rule over her husband’s “inclinations” through the powers of persuasion. Wives should not challenge their husbands directly but should work to change their minds through kindness or even through crying. A woman may be submissive, but that did not mean she was altogether powerless.

The image below is from an 1851 issue of Godey’s Lady’s Book and it accompanied a short story by Alice B. Neal about marriage and fidelity to one’s husband.



[The Constant; or, The Anniversary Present by Alice B. Neal, 1851](#) in Godey’s Ladies Book is in the Public Domain.

The Media

The Antebellum period witnessed the introduction of mass media in the United States through the publication of journals and magazines focused on specific populations and interests, particularly women. The early 19th century saw the rise of several popular publications for women, such as the *Lady’s Amaranth* and the *Ladies’ Magazine*, but by the 1850s, the most popular publication for women was Godey’s *Lady’s Book*, edited by Sarah Josepha Hale, who had previously edited the *Ladies’ Magazine*. Hale, who became a widow with five children at the age of 34, supported her family with her writing, including *Poems for Our Children*, which featured “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” However, it was her work editing magazines for women that proved most significant for 19th century culture. From fashion to housecleaning, literature to feminine behavior, Godey’s wielded a tremendous influence over women throughout the 19th century.



[Sarah Josepha Hale, c. 1831](#) is in the Public Domain

Subscribers to Godey's *Lady's Book* eagerly looked forward to the monthly publication, and women read it cover to cover, then gave it to their daughters and friends to read. Sarah Hale recognized the popularity of the magazine and wrote or edited many of its stories and articles with the intent of not only influencing women's behavior but also appearing to be non-threatening to their menfolk. Thus, a father or husband who wished to ensure that his wife or daughter was not being led astray was assured that Godey's was appropriate. The young bride read articles about how to plan a dinner party or prepare a recipe that was sure to please her new husband, while a young, unmarried girl found advice on courtship and the importance of avoiding unsavory men who preyed on the innocent. Both wealthy women and those of little means found photos and patterns of the latest fashions, as well as the rules regarding their wear.



[The Latest Fashions](#) from Godey's *Lady's Book*, 1854 is in the Public Domain.



[Reflections](#) from Godey's Lady's Book, 1856 is in the Public Domain.



[Fashion Plate](#) from Godey's Lady's Book, 1860 is in the Public Domain.

These fashion plates were painted by hand on copper plates by a group of about 150 women, making Godey's not only an important influence on women but also an important employer of them. The plates were accompanied by detailed descriptions of the recommended fabric for each dress shown as well as the pattern to make it. Fabric was sold by bolt during the 19th century, and it took between 5 and 10 yards of fabric to make each dress, which was very costly. Therefore, most women had only three or four dresses, one for daily work, one for visiting, and one for attending church on Sundays. When their work dress wore out, women recycled it into aprons or curtains and purchased or made a Sunday dress, shifting the Sunday dress to visiting and the visiting dress to work. Only upper-class women could afford to have several dresses made of fine fabric, such as silk or muslin. Regardless of wealth or status, women were expected to present a clean and fashionable appearance.

Separate Spheres and Women's Friendships

The Cult of Domesticity and 19th century media encouraged women to keep to their proper space or sphere, which was the home, while men were expected to leave the home to work, socialize, and engage in politics or business. This meant that women spent most of their time together and without the company of men, performing household chores, reading, or running errands. While images in *Godey's* and other publications touted marriage as romantic and the relationship between husband and wife as central to the family, the reality for most women was that their female relatives were much more important to them than their male ones, even their husbands. Literature of the day, when written by women, discussed their love for their mother, sisters, aunts, cousins, and female friends. One of the best examples of this is *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. As the title suggests, the story is about the March sisters, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, as they navigate the Civil War era in their home in Massachusetts. The sisters have an unshakable bond and while they all recognize the importance of getting married and starting a family of their own, they are also afraid to lose one another. When Meg marries John, Alcott describes the girls' behavior, "Mother and sisters gathered close, as if loath to give Meg up" (Alcott 1868, ch. 25). When women left home to attend school or work in factories, they were often taken in by older girls, who acted as older sisters to them in the absence of their own family.

Women wrote letters to one another that describe how much they love and miss one another, often using terms we might consider romantic today. An example of this is the friendship between Sarah Butler Wister and Jeannie Field Musgrove, who became friends at the ages of 16 and 14, respectively, and the women remained friends for the rest of their lives. Although Sarah married and had children, she and Jeannie continued to write letters and visit one another into old age. One letter in particular from Sarah to Jeannie after she visited shows the intensity of her feelings, "I shall be entirely alone (this coming week). I can give you no idea how desperately I shall want you...." Jeannie's response read, "Dear darling Sarah! How I love you & how happy I have been! You are the joy of my life.... I cannot tell you how much happiness you gave me, nor how constantly it is all in my thoughts.My darling how I long for the time when I shall see you..." (Smith-Rosenberg 1975, 4) In other letters, Jeannie called Sarah "my dearest lover" and told her goodnight with "A thousand kisses." (Smith-Rosenberg 1975, 4-5). Some historians have argued that letters such as the ones between Sarah and Jeannie are examples of same-sex relationships between women during the 19th century and in fact, letters like these were not particularly unusual between women.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Cult of Domesticity or True Womanhood called on women to be pious, pure, domestic and submissive, to remain within their sphere, and the media of the day reinforced those values through articles, stories, and fashion plates. While the pillars of True Womanhood were only attainable by a small number of women, mostly middle- and upper-class housewives, women from all socioeconomic backgrounds were exposed to them, and many aspired to fulfill them. Still others found these virtues constricting or simply impractical and chose to forge their own paths, which will be discussed in the next section.

Question to Consider

How does the media today influence women's behavior?

II. Working Class Women

Learning Objectives

- Describe life for women and girls living and working in factories.
- Describe the economic choices available for immigrant women.
- Explain the dangers working women experienced due to their lack of legal rights.

The United States' economy underwent dramatic changes during the 19th century due to the Industrial Revolution. The country began the century with less than 5% of the population living in urban areas, but by the end of the century nearly half of Americans were urbanites, and there were a number of cities whose populations had swelled to over one million people. While this urban growth accelerated after the Civil War, the grounds for it were laid in the Antebellum period with the development of factories and mills, mostly in the Northeast, due to its large population of unmarried young women and Irish immigrants.

Mill Girls

The Industrial Revolution was driven by the production of textiles, cloth made from wool, linen, hemp, and, most of all, cotton. For centuries, textile production was done by women and children on the farms, mostly during the winter months when there was little to do outdoors. Some of these textiles were used to clothe the family or were sold at local markets, but by the 17th century, “middle men” would come by each spring to buy whatever the family had produced over the winter and sell the fabric at markets in faraway towns and cities. This system was known as Cottage Industry and the money provided extra income for farming families, especially in years of poor crops.

By the late 18th century, machines such as the spinning jenny and the power loom began replacing Cottage Industry because they could produce far more material in less time. At the same time, the population of New England outgrew the output of the land, leading many young men to move to the frontier to farm. This combination of economic forces left a large population of girls and young women without marriage prospects, which was a serious concern for their families since such women, derisively referred to as Old Maids, were bound to become economic burdens. However, a solution presented itself as textile mills were built along the rivers and streams of New England, creating job opportunities and turning “Old Maids” into Mill Girls.

Factory owners actively recruited girls and young women from the farms of New England to work in the textile mills and shoe factories that were being built throughout the Northeast. The girls were paid a wage and provided room in the factory's dormitory, which was run by a matron whose job was to keep the girls safe and oversee their behavior. Mill girls were required to attend church and any contact with men was chaperoned, thus ensuring their fathers that they were well cared for. Most of the girls sent their wages home to their families, which helped with the struggling farm or provided an education for their brothers. Yet those who wrote their thoughts down in letters or journals indicate that they felt good about being able to contribute to their family income and were proud to earn a paycheck. They also felt a

strong connection to the other girls with whom they lived and worked, a sisterhood, with older girls helping the newly arrived to adjust to life away from home.

The sense of community experienced by many of the mill girls is illustrated by the *Lowell Offering*, a literary magazine containing drawings, poetry, songs, and short stories from the girls who worked at the Lowell Mill in Massachusetts from 1840–1845. The women wrote about home, family, their faith in God, death, and many other themes that were important to them, particularly since they were away from home and family. Below are the opening lines of a short story entitled Marion's Departure:

“She knew that she was dying—but the thought
Came with no terror—for her soul was full
Of heavenly hope and peace; and from her lips,
Flowed the rich music of the Christian's faith,
Till death's dark seal had stamped them for its own.” (Orianna 1842)

Most of the works within the magazine were identified only by the first name of the author, in this case Orianna, who wrote Marion's Departure about the death of a woman's sister. Although we cannot know for certain if the story was based upon the author's experiences, given the closeness women felt for their families and the prevalence of early death during the 19th century, it is likely that it was. The *Lowell Offering* provided the mill girls not only a means of self-expression and community, but it provides modern audiences a glimpse into the hearts and minds of the first generation of factory-working women in the United States.

Mill Girls were proud and happy that they were earning wages and contributing to the families' support, but the work they performed was difficult and often dangerous. Prior to 1830, the mills were relatively safe and wages were fair, but by 1834, wages began to drop and working conditions became more and more unbearable. This caused mill girls to organize one of the first unions in the United States, The Factory Girls Association, which represented young women from several textile mills throughout New England and demanded that wages be raised and working conditions become safer. Their hard work would be rewarded, at first, but by the middle of the 1840s, wages dropped once again, causing them to reorganize as the Female Labor Reform Association and affiliate with a male union, the New England Workingman's Association. This time, their efforts would not be rewarded due to competition from newly arrived, impoverished Irish immigrants who were desperate enough to take the lower wages. By 1850, most mill workers were immigrants who worked for extremely low wages in terrible conditions, which kept them in poverty and risked their health and their lives.



[Two Young Women, c. 1870](#) Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts Lowell Libraries. Image is in the Public Domain

Immigrant Workers

As more and more Irish immigrants entered the United States in the 1840s and 1850s, they swelled the ranks of factory workers and domestic servants, the latter making it easier for middle- and upper-class women to escape the drudgery of housework. For young Irish women, domestic service was considered a large step above factory work but also came with its own set of problems. Factory workers were employed 12 hours a day, six days a week, but many domestic servants were on call 24 hours a day, six days a week, sometimes every day, and lived with the families they served, which allowed for little to no privacy. Irish girls were hired to perform all manner of housework, including cooking, cleaning, child care, and especially laundry, which was the chore most women loathed and hired out as soon as they had any extra money. These young women worked constantly for little pay and even less respect from the families they served. It was not uncommon for domestic servants to experience sexual assault and rape at the hands of their male employers, and if the attack resulted in pregnancy, it was the girl who was dismissed from her post and shamed.

Many Irish girls, particularly those who immigrated alone, found it impossible to support themselves with either factory or domestic service, and so they turned to prostitution to survive. Ironically, within the 19th-century world of high morality, prostitution was a thriving business in all levels of society. Wealthy men tended to frequent high-class brothels where drinking, gambling, and other forms of entertainment were common and the girls worked from private rooms. Prostitutes working in these establishments tended to be better protected and treated reasonably well by their customers, but most prostitutes were not so lucky. Instead of brothels, most prostitutes lived and worked in very small rooms called cribs, with no more than a bed, and still others turned tricks standing up in the alley. The women who worked out of cribs or on the streets earned very little money and endured all manner of abuse from beatings to murder. Further, sexually transmitted diseases were rampant among prostitutes, who suffered the terrible symptoms of illnesses

such as Syphilis without medical care and passed the illnesses on to their customers. Most prostitutes lived dangerously short lives at the very bottom of the socioeconomic ladder.



[Prostitutes in San Francisco, c. 1890](#) is in the Public Domain.

Legal Rights

The daily struggles of working-class women were made even more difficult by the fact that they had virtually no legal protections under the law. Women working in factories or as domestic servants had no legal right to their own wages, so it was not unusual for fathers or husbands to collect a woman's pay directly from her employer. Women who worked as prostitutes, since their very occupation was illegal, had no rights to their pay or physical safety, and they certainly could not go to the police for help. Middle- and upper-class women were protected by the respectability brought to them by their husbands and the ideals of true womanhood, but lower-class women enjoyed no such respect or protection, either in the eyes of the law or society.

Conclusion

While the ideals of the Cult of Domesticity heavily influenced middle- and upper-class women, women who occupied the lowest socioeconomic classes did not have the luxury of maintaining such high moral standards. Their lives, particularly those who were single, were filled with the daily struggle to earn enough money to survive and provide for their families, a task made more difficult because of women's legal rights during the Antebellum era. It would take decades and several reform movements to begin to transform these laws.

Question to Consider

How do you think working-class women were impacted by the ideals of the Cult of Domesticity?

12. Southern Women

Learning Objectives

- Describe the lives of Southern White women of all classes.
- Describe the lives of Free women of color.
- Describe the lives of enslaved women.
- Compare and contrast the current media images with the reality of Southern women's lives during the 19th century.

Women in the Southern United States lived very different lives than those in the North and had different expectations of their behavior depending upon their race and socioeconomic status. The Cult of Domesticity was not prominent in the South, which was largely agrarian with few factories or mills until after the Civil War. Instead, Southern society viewed itself as the last vestige of Feudal Europe, with large manor houses ruled over by highly cultured lords and ladies, worked by serfs who were cared for with a paternalistic love. This genteel ideal was far from the reality for most Southern women, regardless of race and socioeconomic status, who were kept largely uneducated and under the firm control of their husbands, fathers, and masters.

White Women

Most Americans conjure an image of simpering, genteel ladies in hoop skirts when asked about Southern white women during the Antebellum period, but only the wealthiest in society actually lived the life portrayed in films like *Gone with the Wind*. In fact, less than 10% of Southern whites were considered planters, owning hundreds of acres of land and more than 50 slaves. The rest lived on small- and medium-sized farms worked by the family and perhaps some slaves owned by the farmer or hired out from a neighboring plantation. Only 25% of Southern whites owned any slaves at all, most fewer than 10, yet the image of planters and their ladies in wide hoop skirts, dancing in a large ballroom while served by well-dressed and happy slaves persists in the popular imagination.

Plantation Mistress

As previously stated, less than 10% of Southerners were planters, which means that very few women lived lives of leisure and elegance portrayed in popular media. The few who did wielded tremendous influence over their neighbors due to their husband's economic, social, and political power. Governors and congressmen from Southern states were planters, and their wives ran the social circles of the day. One of the most important of these socialites was First Lady Dolley Madison, wife of James Madison.



[Dolley Payne Madison, 1804](#) by Gilbert Stuart is in the Public Domain.

Mrs. Madison was the queen of Southern society, and when her husband was elected president in 1808, she took her talents to Washington and created high society amongst the wives of senators, congressmen, ambassadors, and the like. Southern women were said to have only their fashion and their gossip, and both could be used to make or break anyone in government or business. Thus while Southern men operated the plantations, businesses, and government of the South, their wives wielded tremendous influence behind the scenes by throwing lavish parties and creating opportunities to further their husbands' careers.

In private, the planter's wife was the mistress of the plantation, managing the household with its army of domestic slaves as well as the dairy, the spinning and weaving of cloth, the fowl, and the slaves' weekly rations. Mary Chesnut, who was raised on an Alabama plantation before marrying a South Carolina senator whose family owned three plantations, remarked in her diary that as a child she and her sisters were tasked with making baby clothes for all the new children born to the slaves on the plantation. With rare candor, Mrs. Chesnut also discusses mixed-race children amongst the slaves, saying that the mulattos that are seen in every family exactly resemble the white children, an indictment of the common practice among plantation owners of having sexual relations with their female slaves. The fact that Mary kept a diary at all is exceptional given that less than half of Southern white women were literate before the Civil War, and her words provide a glimpse into the lives and feelings of plantation mistresses.

Farmers' Wives

Most Southern white women were raised by and then married small farmers who grew corn and wheat and raised livestock on land that they worked themselves without using slaves. The women who lived on these farms performed the work typical of most 19th-century farming wives, such as caring for the garden, fowl, and dairy; cooking and cleaning in the house and sometimes even fieldwork if necessary. They typically married young, by 15, and spent most of their adult lives pregnant or nursing children, a third of whom did not survive. These women did not fit the stereotype of the Southern Belle in *Gone with the Wind* but instead wore simple cotton and linen dresses without a hoop, or perhaps a single hoop to prevent tripping, and rarely, if ever, attended parties, balls, or teas.

Free Women of Color

By the 19th century, the North had largely abolished slavery while the South continued the practice legally until 1865, but some areas of the South held a large number of freed people of color, known as Free Blacks. Many had been free for several generations, while others had recently gained their freedom and were working to secure the freedom of their loved ones still in bondage. There were a few common ways that enslaved Africans obtained their freedom, aside from running away.

Some were allowed to work outside of their time on the plantation and could keep the money they earned, which was often saved for years in order to purchase one's freedom, while others were freed in their owner's will or as a personal favor. In her 1861 memoir *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs tells how her mother was given her freedom by their master, who had been raised by Harriet's mother when his own mother died shortly after giving birth to him. He bought her a house nearby, visited often, and provided financial support for her in her elder years. Harriet, on the other hand, was terribly mistreated by the same man and was forced to run away.



[Harriet Jacobs, 1894](#) by Gilbert Studios is in the Public Domain.

Some enslaved African women were able to use their talents and skills to pay for their freedom and that of their children. Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley, the daughter of an enslaved mother and her white owner, was taught to sew as well as read by her mother, and she used those gifts to become a dressmaker for some of the most important women in the South, including Mary Chesnut and Mary Lee, General Robert E. Lee's wife. Elizabeth was treated terribly by her owners, who beat and raped her, causing her to bear a son. She worked to purchase her own freedom as well as that of her son's, which she was able to do in 1855, thanks to a loan from several women for whom she made dresses. After she repaid the loan, Elizabeth moved to Washington, where she established a dressmaking shop and eventually became the seamstress and confidant to Mary Todd Lincoln, First Lady to Abraham Lincoln.



[Elizabeth Keckley, c 1870](#) Image is in the Public Domain.



[Dress of Mary Todd Lincoln by Elizabeth Keckley](#) Smithsonian National American History Museum. [Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication](#)

Enslaved African Women

Madam Keckley and Harriet Jacobs' mothers were exceptions to the reality that most women of color experienced in the South before the Civil War. By the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, nearly 4 million people were held in bondage, half of them women. They experienced never-ending work, either for their owner or to care for their own families. They endured beatings, rape, and even murder at the hands of the people that were legally allowed to treat them in any way they wished.

White owners defended their ownership of other human beings by saying that people of color were unable to care for themselves, but the reality was that without enslaved Africans to care for them, white society could not function. Most enslaved women worked in the fields alongside enslaved men, from dawn to dusk, six days a week. After working in the fields all day, these women tended their own gardens, prepared dinner for their families, and cared for their children. Sarah Gudger, interviewed by the Federal Writer's Project in 1937, described her life like this:

"I sure has had a hard life. Jus wok, an' wok, an' wok. I never knowed nothin' but wok. I never knows what it was to res. I just wok all da time from mornin' til late at night. Workin' the field, chop wood, pull corn. Sometimes I feel like my back surly break. Honey you can't know what a time I had, all cold and hungry. Oh no'm, I ain't tellin' no lies. It's the Gospel truth." (Gudger 1936)



[Sarah Gudger, age 121 c 1936](#) is in the Public Domain.

Enslaved women like Sarah spent their entire lives working but also living in fear of being beaten or raped by their owner or white overseers. It is impossible to know how many mixed-race children were born to enslaved African women over the course of three centuries of slavery, but we know that it was common enough that women like Mary Chesnut and Harriet Jacobs wrote about it, and there are many contemporary photographs and articles about it.



[Isaac and Rosa, slave children from New Orleans, c. 1863](#) Library of Congress. Image is in the Public Domain.

The photograph above shows two enslaved children, Isaac and Rosa, in New Orleans in 1863. It was common practice for abolitionists to take photos of enslaved children and sell them in the North to raise money for relief for freed slaves. However, the photo and the 1864 article in Harper's Weekly that accompanied it tell an additional story of Rosa's parentage: her father was in the Confederate Army while her mother, also a mulatto, had to work very hard to support Rosa; her sister, described as white; and her brothers, described as darker. The relationship between Rosa's mother and father was not included in the article, and it is impossible to know if he was the father of all of the children, if he was her owner, or if the relationship was consensual.

It is known that enslaved women not only endured rape by their owners and overseers, but they were also purposely bred with enslaved males to produce stronger children. Fannie Berry, another former slave interviewed by the Federal Writer's Project, argued with her master about going to live with another slave in order to have children, but she eventually gave in. She also described physically fighting with her master when he tried to rape her, "I snatched his face all to pieces, and there was no more bothering Fannie from him." However, she acknowledged that she was fortunate to get away, "But, oh Honey, some slaves would be so beat up when they resisted, and sometimes, if you rebelled, the overseer would kill you. Us colored women had to go through plenty, I tell you." (Berry 1936)

Mammies and Jezebels

Enslaved women were viewed by whites as existing for their service, whether it was to satisfy the sexual needs of owners and overseers or care for their owner's children. Thus, women of color, whether enslaved or free, were and are often

stereotyped into one of two archetypes, the Mammy or the Jezebel. These two images are still common in the modern age.

The Mammy stereotype is commonly found in the modern age in film, such as the character Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*, and in common household brands such as Aunt Jemima pancakes, but the image runs very deep in the psyche of Southern whites. Many white children were raised by women of color, whom they affectionately called Mammy, and they often spent as much time with these women as with their own mothers. The practice of hiring a woman of color to care for white children continued well into the 20th century, allowing the stereotype that Black women are kind, loving, and always there to care for white children to permeate the minds of whites for most of history. Whites struggled to come to grips with reality when their beloved Mammies left after slavery was over, and so they maintained the image in the media, using it to advertise food and containers.



[*Mammy and Her Pet*](#) is in the Public Domain.

Equally powerful to the Mammy archetype is the Jezebel, or temptress. Whites excused men's rape of enslaved women by painting the rapist as the victim of seduction rather than the perpetrator of the rape. White women whose husbands slept with their slaves often took their anger and frustration out on the enslaved woman because they were powerless to say or do anything to their husbands. Women of color were not viewed as real women, so they did not deserve the same protection as white women from rape and sexual assault. The Jezebel archetype, which developed in Colonial times, is the basis for the hypersexualization of women of color in modern America.

Conclusion

Southern women's experiences in the Antebellum period varied widely depending upon their race and socioeconomic background. While the Southern Belle and Mammy archetypes are powerful images of the pre-Civil War South, women led far more complicated lives.

Question to Consider

How does the "Mammy" archetype continue in the media into the present day?

13. Moral Reform

Learning Objectives

- Explain how and why women's education became important.
- Explain why middle class women became involved in moral reform.
- Describe women's involvement in Temperance Reform.
- Describe women's contributions to the Abolition Movement.

The Cult of Domesticity focused attention on a woman's moral influence over her husband and children, which gave rise to the idea that women could also be a moral influence over society as a whole. Using the inroads made by Republican Womanhood, middle- and upper-class women argued that they should be allowed an education not just to raise better men for the Republic but to raise the morality of all of American society. Women used their education and the ideals of True Womanhood to build movements to end prostitution, alcohol abuse, and slavery.

Educating Women

Republican Womanhood, an ideal first developed just after the American Revolution, encouraged education for women for the first time in American history, and many women took advantage of society's acceptance to attend not only primary school (today's elementary schools) but also what were known as Female Seminaries (today's high schools and community colleges). Troy Seminary, today known as Emma Willard School, was founded by Emma Hart Willard in 1821 and instructed women in the sciences, mathematics, foreign languages, and other subjects previously viewed as appropriate only for male study. In 1837, Mary Lyon founded Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, today known as Mount Holyoke College, encouraging students to "*Go forward, attempt great things, accomplish great things.*" (Lyon 1837)

Troy, Mount Holyoke, and other female seminaries showed that women were capable of performing at the same intellectual level as men and represented a major shift in the way society viewed women, at least in the Northern part of the country. As more women attended female seminaries, it became socially acceptable for a woman to be educated, and some women took advantage of this acceptance to push their domestic role into the public sphere.

Teaching

Many communities, particularly in the North, had had public schools since the Colonial period. As early as 1650, Massachusetts required that all communities with at least 50 families have a school for the children. However, there were no professional qualifications for teachers early on, and most schools were Dame Schools, or schools run by an unmarried woman such as a widow or a young unmarried woman, and these were often operated out of the woman's home, while schools in larger communities were operated by male teachers in a schoolhouse, paid by public funds. By the early 19th century, public education was viewed as a way to infuse respect and love for American culture

and Republican ideals into the next generation, and thanks to the ideals of Republican Womanhood and the Cult of Domesticity, women were viewed as the ideal teachers.

While some women used the ideal of Republican Womanhood to access education for themselves, other women used the ideal of True Womanhood to argue that women's virtues of piety and purity made them ideal teachers. Catharine Beecher, founder of the Hartford Female Seminary, wrote several essays regarding the fitness of women to be teachers and encouraging women who did not have children to devote themselves to educating the children of others. In 1829, Ms. Beecher presented "Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education" to the trustees of the Hartford Female Academy, in which she argued,

"It is to *mothers*, and to *teachers*, that the world is to look for the character that is to be enstamped on each succeeding generation, for it is to them that the great business of education is almost exclusively committed. And will it not appear by examination that neither mothers nor teachers have ever been properly educated for their profession." (Beecher 1829, 17)



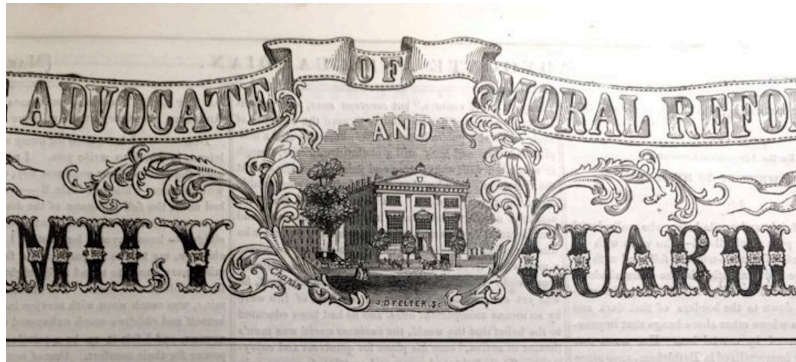
[Catharine Esther Beecher, c. 1860](#) is in the Public Domain.

Beecher not only argued that women were the most important in the formation of children's character, but she also argued that they had not been properly educated to do so. She continued to be a tireless advocate for women's education and women's entry into the teaching profession for most of the 19th century, encouraging single women to become teachers as an alternative to marriage rather than remaining a burdensome "old maid" to their family. In the 1830s, Catharine Beecher moved to Ohio, then the frontier, and continued writing essays encouraging single women to move West and become teachers. As California opened up during the 1850s, many single women moved to settle the newly acquired lands in the West, carrying the ideals of True Womanhood with them and teaching them to a new generation.

By the end of the Civil War, teaching had transitioned to a largely female career, resulting in lower pay, lack of housing, and longer hours than for male teachers. The reasons for the disparity in pay were a combination of the idea that women did not have families to support, so they did not need the same pay as men, and that teaching was an extension of motherhood, which received no pay at all. In many respects, teaching was a highly exploitive career for women, but it was embraced by many women who wished to contribute to society and morally influence the next generation.

Prostitution

As discussed in the previous section on Antebellum working class women, prostitution was a booming business during the Industrial Revolution, serving as employment opportunities for lower and working class women in either a full or part time capacity due to the low wages found in factory and domestic work. Sensible Victorians often referred to prostitutes as “Soiled Doves,” women who had once been pure and innocent but had fallen on hard times and been forced to sell themselves for survival. This was the only way women of the middle and upper classes understood prostitutes, and it was with this understanding that they set out to save them from a life of shame.



[Header for The Advocate, 1854.](#) is in the Public Domain.

Middle- and upper-class reformers organized themselves into groups that traveled into the most unsavory parts of town to speak to prostitutes directly. They carried with them the Bible and preprinted tracts with Bible verses, which they handed out to women they saw on the streets. As they did this, two problems they had not expected emerged: most prostitutes were not interested in the reformers' message, and the reformers, by exposing themselves to the rough areas of town, were sometimes mistaken for prostitutes themselves. Thus, it became too controversial and too frustrating for most reformers to continue to visit the women in the streets, and so they turned to the media to raise awareness and shame the men who frequented the brothels.

in 1834, thousands of upper- and middle-class women formed the New York Female Moral Reform Society and published a newsletter called *The Advocate of Moral Reform and Family Guardian*. The newsletter was intended to expose not only the horrors of prostitution but the immorality of the men who frequently patronized them. Unlike most reformers, the NYFMRS was unafraid to be seen on the seedy streets of New York, and so they went to the brothels and took down the names of the men who entered, printing them in *The Advocate*. They believed they had a religious imperative to end immoral behavior in New York City, which had seen a heavy rise in prostitution, alcohol, and gambling during the Industrial Revolution. Using the ideals espoused in the Cult of Domesticity, women reformers such as the NYFMRS claimed the power to influence the morality of their husbands, sons, and other male relatives within their community. They believed that prostitution went hand in hand with alcohol, and many began to advocate for banning the substance altogether.

Temperance

The crusade against alcohol began in the early 19th century and was closely connected to the women's moral reform movement as well as the Industrial Revolution. Factory owners became concerned about their workers coming in to work intoxicated or hung over, causing accidents and slowing work, but female moral reformers believed that

temperance would end prostitution, gambling, political corruption, domestic violence, and poverty. These women used the ideals of the Cult of Domesticity to defend their sometimes radical behavior.

Reform groups such as the abovementioned NYFMRS connected alcohol use with prostitution, gambling, and other activities they deemed immoral, and they believed that ending the use of alcohol would solve these social problems. Further, reformers argued that women and children endured violence at the hands of drunk husbands and faced financial ruin because their husbands spent the household income on alcohol. Early reform groups engaged in activism at the local level, focusing their attention on protests against bars and saloons in their own communities and lobbying local government officials to close drinking establishments on Sundays. A national temperance movement was not founded until the Women's Christian Temperance Union in 1874.

Local reform groups used protest tactics ranging from collecting signatures on petitions to physically barring men from entering bars and saloons. The latter tactic was considered extreme but very effective, as it shamed the men attempting to enter the establishments, and they lost income as a result. Women gathered in small groups and blocked the front entrances, linking arms and singing hymns. Men had to navigate around this bulwark of pious women in order to enter, and many lacked the courage to do so.

Collecting signatures and publishing pamphlets was a far more acceptable method of drawing attention to the evils of alcohol use for most women. The following image, entitled *The Drunkard's Progress*, was created by Nathaniel Currier in 1846 as a caution against even social drinking, depicting it as leading down a path to alcoholism. The victims of the drunkard are his wife and child, depicted at the bottom of the image.



[The Drunkard's Progress, Nathaniel Currier, 1846](#) is in the Public Domain.

Temperance groups saw limited success as the owners of many drinking establishments agreed to close on Sundays and religious holidays, and many local laws were passed to limit alcohol sales and consumption. Maine was the first state to abolish all alcohol sales and consumption when they passed the Maine Law in 1851. The law was replaced in 1858 by one that was less strict and allowed some alcohol consumption, which shows how unpopular temperance was in the years prior to the Civil War. It would take a century and a national movement before prohibition became the law of the land.

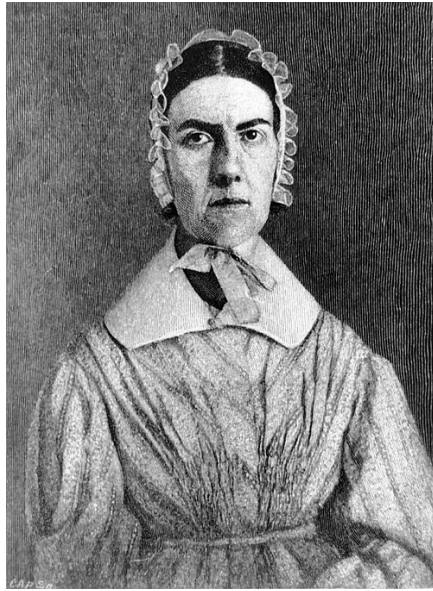
Abolition

The movement to end slavery was an extremely important and effective moral reform during the early and mid-19th century, involving both white women and women of color in everything from collecting signatures on petitions to conducting the Underground Railroad. Publications such as *The Liberator* by William Lloyd Garrison, *The North Star* by Frederick Douglass, and especially the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe exposed many whites in the North to the evils of slavery for the first time, leading to a national movement to abolish the institution. The cruelties of slavery, particularly the rape of enslaved women, attacked the very heart of the Cult of True Womanhood and led some women to engage in dangerous and radical behavior to draw attention to it.

The Grimké Sisters

The Quakers were among the earliest American groups to speak out against the institution of slavery, and their faith led them to create the Underground Railroad, a system of safe houses leading the enslaved out of bondage, during the mid-18th century. After the American Revolution, Northern states began abolishing slavery, and by 1830, slavery was only legal in the South; the Underground Railroad expanded its role and reach, using sympathetic whites and former slaves to conduct enslaved people to freedom in the North. Among the most vocal and radical of female Quaker activists were Sarah and Angelina Grimké.

Born into a prominent slaveholding family in South Carolina, the Grimké sisters saw slavery and its effects on enslaved people firsthand. When Sarah first learned how to read and write, she began teaching some of her family's slaves until her father forbid her from continuing. In 1821, Sarah traveled to Philadelphia with her father, where she met a number of Quakers and was so influenced by their antislavery ideas that she decided to stay and join their faith. Her younger sister, Angelina, joined her in Philadelphia in 1829, converted to the Quaker faith, and the sisters became members of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. The women wrote essays and gave speeches decrying the institution of slavery and were viewed as radical because they spoke in front of audiences of men and women. In 1836, Angelina Grimké published *An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*, a pamphlet in which she encouraged Southern women to use their influence to end slavery in the South. "I know you do not make the laws, but I also know that you are the wives and mothers, the sisters and daughters of those who do; and if you really suppose you can do nothing to overthrow slavery, you are greatly mistaken." (Grimké 1836, 16) Her pamphlet so enraged Southern men that it was publicly burned and Grimké herself was threatened with death if she ever returned to the South.



[Angelina Grimké, Wood Engraving](#) Image is in the Public Domain.

Moses

While most abolitionist women circulated petitions and pamphlets or made speeches, others were driven to more dangerous activities, such as operating stations or acting as conductors on the Underground Railroad. Because it was illegal, the Underground Railroad used coded terms like “stationmaster” and “conductor” to refer to those who operated the safehouses and led enslaved people to freedom. A number of anonymous families in the South and along the Northern banks of the Ohio river helped runaway slaves by giving them food, clothing, and shelter as they were running, serving as safe places to stop and rest as they made their way North to freedom. Others, such as Harriet Tubman, actively traveled between the North and the South, leading enslaved people to freedom using the system of safehouses created by abolitionists. Conductors and station operators helped runaways at great risk to themselves and their families, both because they were breaking the law, risking fines and imprisonment, and because if their neighbors discovered their activities, they might even be killed by mob violence. Tubman herself had a bounty of several hundred dollars on her head, yet she made over a dozen trips South and led nearly one hundred enslaved people to freedom in the North, including most of her family.

**THREE HUNDRED DOLLARS
REWARD.**

RANAWAY from the subscriber on Monday the 17th ult., three negroes, named as follows: **HARRY**, aged about 19 years, has on one side of his neck a wen, just under the ear, he is of a dark chestnut color, about 5 feet 8 or 9 inches high; **BEN**, aged about 25 years, is very quick to speak when spoken to, he is of a chestnut color, about six feet high; **MINTY**, aged about 27 years, is of a chestnut color, fine looking, and about 5 feet high. One hundred dollars reward will be given for each of the above named negroes, if taken out of the State, and \$50 each if taken in the State. They must be lodged in Baltimore, Easton or Cambridge Jail, in Maryland.

ELIZA ANN BRODESS.
Near Bucktown, Dorchester county, Md.
Oct. 3d, 1849.

The Delaware Gazette will please copy the above three weeks, and charge this office.

[Advertisement for Tubman and her brothers, 1849](#) is in the Public Domain.



[Harriet Tubman, c. 1871](#) Image is in the Public Domain.

Thousands of women worked tirelessly for the end of slavery throughout the Antebellum period. Some, like the Grimké sisters, wrote and spoke about the evils of slavery while others, like Harriet Tubman, risked their lives to free enslaved people. Regardless of their activities, abolitionist women used the ideals of True Womanhood to appeal to men, who alone had the power to make slavery illegal.

Conclusion

The Antebellum moral reform movement was the first time women in large numbers were engaged in working for social change. Whether working to end prostitution, alcohol abuse, or slavery, women used their education and their role as the moral compass of their families to effect change that would benefit society at large. While most women were content to work within the bounds of the Cult of Domesticity, a small number of women began to question the ideals of True Womanhood and demand that women be given the same rights that men enjoy.

Question to Consider

Which 19th-century moral issue do you think was the most important and why?

14. First Wave Feminism--Woman's Suffrage

Learning Objectives

- Describe women's attempts to gain the right to vote during the pre-Civil War era.

While the Cult of Domesticity or True Womanhood gave upper and middle class women symbolic power through their moral influence over their husbands and children, some women rejected the ideals of True Womanhood and proposed that women and men should have the same rights and power socially, economically, and politically. Many women's rights advocates had already been involved in aspects of the moral reform movements, such as Temperance speaker Susan B. Anthony and abolitionist Lucretia Mott, so they used the skills they learned in other movements to organize conventions, write pamphlets, and make speeches to bring attention to their cause. These women joined with many others to organize several women's rights conventions and write a feminist manifesto that drove the movement for the next century.

Seneca Falls, 1848

In 1848, a group of women organized the first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls, New York with the following advertisement in the *Seneca County Courier*, "WOMAN'S RIGHTS CONVENTION.—A Convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman"("Today in History – July 19"). The women were a mix of Quaker and non-Quaker from the area who had been previously involved in a variety of moral reform activities, led by Quaker preacher Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Mott, raised in the Quaker faith which taught that men and women were equal before God, also found inspiration for the convention after visiting and speaking with Seneca women from the Cattaraugus reservation and learning about their traditional tribal power. Stanton, on the other hand, was inspired to consider women's rights because of her experiences at an anti-slavery convention in London, where she were required to sit separately from the men and behind a screen. This event profoundly shaped both women, inspiring them to begin fighting for women's rights as a reform in its own right.



[Lucretia Mott, 1842](#) by Joseph Kyle is in the Public Domain.



[Elizabeth Cady Stanton & her daughter, Harriot, 1856](#) is in the Public Domain.
Harriot was also active in the Suffrage Movement and lived to see women vote in 1920.

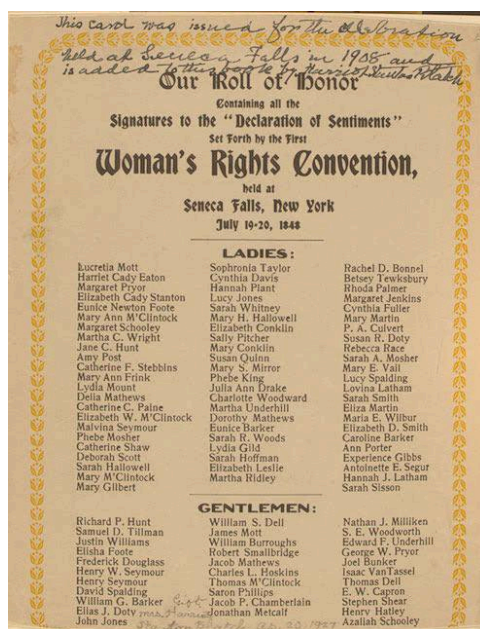
The Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions

The convention took place on July 19 and 20, 1848 and was attended by about 300 men and women. After spending two days discussing the primary issues and concerns regarding women's rights, the organizers adjourned and collected these into a document known as the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, which was presented on the last day of the convention for ratification by those in attendance. The document, structured after the Declaration of Independence, intended to fundamentally change the definition of citizenship: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; and described history as the constant abuse of women by men in the same way that the

Declaration of Independence described history as the constant abuse of the common people by despots, harkening back to the arguments made by Enlightenment philosophes Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft.

The Declaration of Sentiments listed the abuses that men have heaped upon women, such as made her “civilly dead” upon marriage, taken her wages, denied her education, taxed without consent, and denied the right to vote. After this list of grievances, the writers listed a number of Resolutions, or demands to change the situation, including: “Resolved, That woman is man’s equal – was intended to be so by the Creator,” and the most shocking of all, “Resolved, That it is the duty of women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise.” If of the grievances and resolutions had been discussed as a group during the convention, except for the resolve regarding the right to vote, which was added by Elizabeth Cady Stanton at the last minute. When the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions was read aloud, many were shocked at the addition of the suffrage resolution and a significant number of attendees refused to sign onto the document when Stanton refused to remove it. Therefore, while 300 men and women attended the convention, only 100 ultimately signed the resulting document. Notable among the male signers was Frederick Douglass, who not only attended the convention and signed the document, he published an editorial in support of women’s rights in his own newspaper, *The North Star*.

Woman’s suffrage remained the most controversial issue within the women’s rights movement until the early 20th century.



[Signers of the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, 1848](#) is in the Public Domain.

Akron, Ohio, 1851

Three years after Seneca Falls, Frances Barker Gage organized another women’s rights convention at Akron, Ohio to address concerns about education and labor. The event featured letters from Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Amelia Bloomer, who published a woman’s newspaper, as well as a number of scheduled speakers. However, the speaker who stole the show was not supposed to speak at all but simply took the stage on her own. The speech she gave was recorded by Mrs. Gage from memory, and so it sometimes takes slightly different forms. The speaker was Sojourner Truth.

“Ain’t I a Woman?”

Sojourner Truth was well known as a abolitionist speaker and her speech at the Akron convention pointed out an issue that had been, and would largely continue to be, absent from the conversation about women’s rights: race.

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that ‘twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what’s all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what’s this they call it? [member of audience whispers, “intellect”] That’s it, honey. What’s that got to do with women’s rights or negroes’ rights? If my cup won’t hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn’t you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can’t have as much rights as men, ‘cause Christ wasn’t a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain’t got nothing more to say. (Truth 1851)

Sojourner Truth’s speech pointed out the hypocrisy of the women’s rights movement. As the authors of the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions had asked men to open citizenship and its rights to women, Truth was asking white women to include women of color in their definition of womanhood. Her request went unanswered and race and class differences continued to divide the women’s rights movement for more than a century.



[Sojourner Truth Cabinet Card c. 1864](#) is in the Public Domain.

Women's Newspapers

The year after the Seneca Falls Convention, Amelia Bloomer began publishing *The Lily* in New York, the first newspaper edited and published by a woman. Initially started as a temperance newspaper, she soon began publishing articles about the women's rights movement and featured essays written by the leading suffragists of her day. In addition to discussing temperance and women's legal rights, Bloomer advocated for women's dress reform. While visiting her friend, Elizabeth Smith Miller, she noted that she was wearing Turkish style trousers (sometimes referred to as Harem pants) underneath a skirt that fell just below her knees. Amelia began wearing the outfit herself and used her newspaper to encourage other women to adopt it, which led to the outfit being referred to as "Bloomers." Several leading suffragists adopted bloomers while traveling and speaking publicly, but found that crowds were so distracted by their clothing that they missed their message, and so most abandoned the dress.



[Amelia Bloomer in Rational Dress, c.1852](#) is in the Public Domain.

The Lily was the first newspaper dedicated to the “Emancipation of Woman from Intemperance, Injustice, Prejudice, and Bigotry” (Bloomer 1851) but it would not be the last. The 1850s saw a large number of women’s rights newspapers edited by women, including *The Genius of Liberty* by Elizabeth Aldrich, *The Pioneer and Woman’s Advocate* by Ann Spencer, *The Una* by Paula Wright Davis, and Lydia Hasbrouck’s *The Woman’s Advocate* and *The Sibyl*, which was published through 1864. While most of these newspapers were only published for a few years and reached local audiences, they show us the extent to which some women were advocating for women’s rights and elevating the voices of their sisters.

Conclusion

The women’s rights movement began out of the moral reform movements of the early 19th century, but it would continue until the 21st century and take various forms. Legendary women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott created a movement that addressed property rights, employment, education, and political power while women like Sojourner Truth asked why women of color were being excluded from the movement. The foot soldiers of the movement, women like Amelia Bloomer and Susan B. Anthony, traveled the country, speaking at conventions and public meetings encouraging women to rise with them and demand their rights and for men to share their power with them. These women, and many others, fought for their rights for the next century, although they were derailed for a time by a pressing national emergency, The Civil War.

Question to Consider

Why was woman’s suffrage, or the right to vote, so controversial during this time?

15. Women in Westward Expansion

Learning Objectives

- Evaluate the impact Westward expansion had on the Indigenous and Hispanic women who already lived there.
- Analyze the ways in which White women's ideals about True Womanhood transformed as they moved West.
- Evaluate how moving West impacted enslaved women.
- Compare the experiences of Asian women with those of other women of color in the Far West.

Acquiring and colonizing lands west of the Mississippi River was a primary driver of the United States' foreign policy and economic growth during the 19th century. When the century began, the country stretched from the Atlantic to the Mississippi, but by the middle of the century, it stretched to the Pacific Ocean. Expansion began in 1803 when the U.S. purchased the Louisiana Territory from France, doubling its size with the stroke of a pen and adding the vast areas of the Great Plains and prairie as well as thousands of Indigenous people and about 10,000 French citizens to the United States. The government used the plains and prairie as reservation land for Eastern tribes such as the Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Seminole, Sac, Fox, Shawnee, Miami, Delaware, Wyandotte, Peori, and the Potawatami, who were rounded up from their ancestral homelands and moved to assigned regions west of the Mississippi, mostly in modern day Oklahoma and Kansas. In 1836, White American settlers in Tejas joined with discontented Tejanos in a revolt against Mexico which resulted in its claim to be the Republic of Texas before it was annexed into the United States in 1845. This act of aggression led to the U.S.-Mexican War, which resulted in Mexico ceding half of its northern territories to the United States in the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848. Over 100,000 Mexican citizens and tens of thousands of Indigenous people were added to the country. The treaty required that the government protect the rights of the former Mexican, now American, citizens and respect their culture and language in the law. At the same time that the United States was at war with Mexico, it settled its dispute with Great Britain over the Pacific Northwest when it signed the Treaty of Oregon and established the border between Canada and what would become the states of Washington and Idaho. This treaty brought tens of thousands of Indigenous peoples into the United States.



[Map of U.S. Territorial Acquisitions, 19th century](#) from the National Atlas of the United States is in the Public Domain.

While we often view the story of Westward expansion as a male story involving rugged cowboys, grizzled gold miners, and pitched battles between the U.S. Army and various Native American tribes, that is only part of the story. Like the east coast of the United States before the English arrived, the Trans-Mississippi West was home to tens of thousands of Indigenous women from myriad cultures and ways of life, some of whom had already learned to navigate European colonizers from France and Spain before the United States acquired their homelands in the Louisiana Purchase, Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and Treaty of Oregon. Spain colonized the region we refer to today as the Southwest and California from 1609 through 1821, during which time they established missions and presidios to subdue and colonize the Indigenous populations and created ranches and towns where families settled. In 1821, the region became a part of a newly independent Mexico. Once the U.S. took these regions over, White families moved west, bringing the ideals of womanhood with them, along with enslaved people who were taken west against their will. During the California Gold Rush, women from all over the world, especially Asia, immigrated to the region, adding another group to the diverse landscape of the Far West.

Indigenous Women in the Far West

French Colonization

As you can see in the above map, the territory of Louisiana encompassed the Great Plains and northern prairies. The French first sent explorers and fur traders into this region in the 1600s, making alliances with several local tribes in order to hunt and trade fur along the Great Lakes and its tributaries, a trade that they dominated even after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. During these two centuries, fur traders, who were almost exclusively male, often married into allied tribes and had bi-cultural children who often grew up to become fur traders themselves. Some native peoples converted to Catholicism and took on French culture or blended their indigenous cultures with that of the French and French fur traders were usually adopted as members of allied tribes. Perhaps the most famous of these bi-culture marriages was that of Sacagawea and Toussaint Charbonneau.

Sacagawea

Sacagawea's story is similar to that of Pocahontas and the Indian Princess trope in that it was written exclusively by European men, in this case her husband and William Clark of the Corp of Discovery, and it involves her helping and protecting White men. According to Clark's diary, Sacagawea was from the Shoshoni tribe, who occupied modern day Idaho along the Snake River and on both sides of the Rocky Mountains but was kidnapped as a child, then sold to Charbonneau. She spoke several indigenous languages and was crucial as an interpreter, particularly since her husband did not speak any indigenous language as well as he claimed when they were hired as a guide at Fort Mandan in modern day North Dakota. She earned the admiration of Lewis and Clark when she saved journals and other important items from a capsized canoe. When the Corp of Discovery came to Shoshoni land, they found that Sacagawea's brother was chief and she was able to negotiate for horses to carry them over the Rockies. She continued on with them to the Pacific, stayed through the winter, then traveled back to Fort Mandan. Sacagawea had a son while on the journey to the Pacific, so all that she did should take into account that she had a baby with her. However, there are major problems with translation throughout the journey and Clark's diary is likely inaccurate. Sacagawea is claimed by both the Shoshoni and Hidatsa and each have conflicting stories about her life and death. It is therefore impossible to know for sure who she truly was or what happened to her based upon the wide variety of stories about her. However, it is certain that Sacagawea was a crucial member of the Corp of Discovery.



[Lewis, Clark, and Sacagawea by Paxson, date unknown](#) is in the Public Domain.

Spanish Colonization

While Spain's empire in North America was centered in Mexico City, the former Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, they sent expeditions north into what is today the West Coast and Desert Southwest United States to lay claim to these areas as well. Expeditions to El Norte, as the Spanish called it, consisted of the Spanish Army, Catholic priests, and civilians who supported these groups, including the wives and children of army officers and skilled craftsmen and camp followers. They founded missions and presidios (military forts) then civilian communities throughout the region, the first of which was Santa Fe, founded in 1608 in what is today New Mexico and among the last were the 21 missions along the California coast. Regardless of where they were located, the military, church, and civilian populations worked together to bring the Indigenous populations under control, forcing them to build, then live at the missions, become Catholic, and forsake their own cultures and traditions.

Mission Life

The Spanish soldiers and priests worked together to take the local native peoples from their villages and force them to live and work at the missions. Men and women were segregated at the mission and the women were locked into their dormitories at night, supposedly for their own protection, although the rape of native women at the missions was very common. In addition to sexual violence and exploitation, indigenous women were forced to give up their traditional culture, language, and religion in favor of Catholicism and Spanish culture and language. They lost their traditional roles within their tribes as healers, political leaders, and respected elders and because women were the keepers of culture, they were no longer able to pass along their culture to the next generation. Death at the missions was also very common, as European diseases such as smallpox and influenza decimated the people because they lacked immunity and were crowded into mission dormitories. The indigenous population of California before the Spanish arrived is estimated to have been about 300,000 but by 1848, it was estimated at 150,000. Tribal communities in the Southwest, such as the Zuni and Hopi (whom the Spanish called Pueblos because they lived in towns) were similarly decimated due to the mission system, diseases, and war brought by the Spanish.

Piu-uina

Native women did fight against the usurpation of their authority and culture. Piu-uina (Josefa) of the Chalon nation in California, lived at Mission Soledad as a young girl and married a Chalon man, then when he died, she remarried a Spanish soldier, Martin Olivera, with whom she had nine children over their twenty year marriage. Piu-uina taught her children the Chalon language and culture while traveling with her husband from Soledad to Carmel to San Miguel, serving the community as a midwife. Although she was killed, along with one of her daughters and grandchild, by Anglo-American men in 1848, the rest of her children survived and continued to pass on the culture and language that Piu-uina taught them.



[Piu-uina, date unknown](#) is in the Public Domain.

United States' Colonization

The policy of the United States towards the various indigenous tribes within its borders would not be much different than its attitude during the colonial era. While some people supported the idea of teaching Native Americans English, converting them to Christianity, and incorporating them into the general population, many more viewed them as people who could never become part of the United States, could never become “civilized.” So while some church groups sent missionaries out to convert the indigenous population and teach them to be White, the government itself developed a program in which Native people would be taken from their ancestral homes east of the Mississippi river and placed on reservations throughout the Great Plains and prairie of the Louisiana territory. This policy not only disrupted the cultures of the Eastern tribes, but also that of the people who already lived in the Louisiana territory. These tribes, like the Osage and Kansa, would also be rounded up and forced to live on reservations.

This pattern continued across the Great Plains during and after the Civil War, when the government sponsored the extermination of the buffalo in order to bring nomadic tribes like the Lakota and Comanche onto reservations, eventually taking their children into boarding schools in order to “kill the Indian in him, and save the man.” (Pratt 1892, 46). In California, the Gold Rush of 1849 brought tens of thousands of people from all over the world into the state and its government ushered in a policy of genocide against the Native California population, reducing it from 150,000 in

1848 to less than 30,000 by 1900. While some of this was due to disease, the state government paid bounties for scalps belonging to Indigenous men, women, and children, and looked the other way as women and children were raped and trafficked into prostitution. Indigenous women throughout the Far West were under assault in every form for over a century and they are just beginning to rebuild what was lost.

Spanish and Mexican Women in the Far West

Women were a part of the settlement of the Southwest and California by the Spanish and later Mexican governments. Women came to El Norte with their husbands and fathers serving in the Spanish army or as civilian skilled craftsmen and businessmen. Over time, these women created a society on the edges of the Spanish empire and enjoyed certain legal privileges that their sisters in the English colonies did not.

Frontier Duality

Spanish women rebuilt European style communities on the frontier while navigating the social expectations of their day. On the one hand, they were expected to be soft, feminine, and dependent on men, but on the other hand, circumstances demanded that they be strong, resilient, and self-reliant. Men were often gone serving with the army or away on business, leaving their wives and daughters alone for weeks at a time to care for and defend themselves. These women managed businesses and ranches on their own, often performing men's chores that would have been considered unfeminine in Europe. Of course, society was still socially stratified and the wives of wealthy men, *doñas*, usually managed households while poor women performed the housework.

Legal Rights

Spanish law, which would be adopted by Mexico when it became independent in 1821, allowed women more legal rights than did English law. For example, women were allowed to own property and retained control over it after they married. They were also able to access the courts, to sue and be sued, having a legal identity of their own outside of their husband's and father's. On the frontier, women could and did hold land grants in their own name, operating ranches and other businesses in many parts of El Norte. Women even owned and operated cantinas without social stigma, very different from the English colonies.

Maria Ygnacia López de Carrillo

Maria Ygnacia was born in San Diego, California, the daughter of a Spanish soldier and a half African, half European mother. She went on to marry another soldier, Joaquin Carrillo, with whom she had 12 surviving children. When her husband died, she took her 9 minor children and moved in with her daughter, who was married to Mariano Vallejo, a local politician and future California governor. With the help of her son and son-in-law, she was able to secure a land grant of nearly 9,000 acres in 1841 on which she established Rancho Cabeza de Santa Rosa, which eventually became the city of Santa Rosa, California. Her children would go on to become prominent in state politics for several decades.



[Unconfirmed image of Maria Ignacia Lopez de Carrillo](#) is in the Public Domain.

Doña Tules

Maria Gertrudis Barceló owned and operated a cantina in New Mexico, capitalizing on local trade routes on the Santa Fe Trail. Although she was married, she operated the business on her own and continued to use her maiden name. She amassed a fortune catering to miners, businessmen, traders, and other travelers, having more than \$10,000 and owning several homes when she died in 1852. Newspapers in the United States at the time painted her as a gambler, drinker, smoker, prostitute, and madam and criticized her wealth as ill-gotten gains. In spite of this, she lent the U.S. Army money to help fund its invasion and occupation of New Mexico in 1846 and she even exposed a plot that would have killed hundreds of soldiers. Sadly, there are no known photos of Doña Tules.

Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo

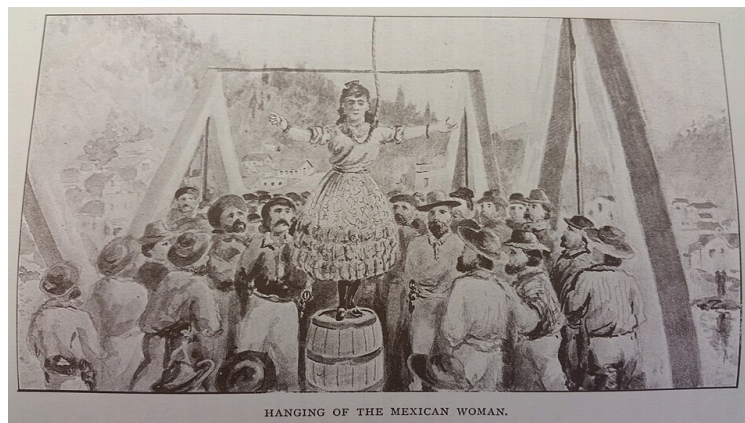
After the war between the United States and Mexico, the two countries signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ceded El Norte to the United States and guaranteed citizenship to the 100,000 or so Mexican citizens who lived there. However, as the territory changed hands, the laws that governed women changed as well. El Norte had been under Spanish law, which allowed women, regardless of marital status, a legal identity but the law of the United States was still largely influenced by English Common Law, which did not recognize women as legally independent in most cases. As more White settlers moved into the region, especially during and after the Gold Rush in 1849, many Anglo American men married Mexican American women, thus acquiring their property under U.S. law. Still others squatted (illegally built homes) on the lands of Mexican American women, who then had to fight in U.S. courts to remove them.

In addition to the loss of legal rights, the racist attitudes of most White settlers negatively impacted Mexican American women. While wealthy doñas were often viewed as genteel ladies, similar to Southern planters' wives, poor women were

usually viewed as exotic sirens or sexually available, which often subjected them to discrimination and violence. One such woman was Josefa, also known as Juanita.

“Juanita”

Josefa lived in a Sierra mining camp called Downieville during the height of the Gold Rush. Almost nothing is known of her life before the day she was killed by a mob, not even her last name or the exact story of her alleged crime. According to the men who served as her jury and executioners, she was a murderer who had stabbed an Australian man called Cannon in the heart. Josefa and her husband, Jose, claimed that a drunk Cannon had burst through their front door the night before and when they confronted him the following day, he attempted to enter their home a second time when Josefa stabbed him. Josefa was arrested, charged with murder, tried, convicted and sentenced to die by hanging in the space of several hours on July 5, 1851. Before her sentence could be carried out by the law, she was seized by the mob and hung from the span of a bridge just outside of town. Her husband, Jose, was found not guilty but told to get out of town that same day. Josefa’s death is commemorated near Downieville today, where the historical marker refers to her a “Juanita,” which was a derogatory term commonly used in Gold Rush California to refer to any woman of Mexican heritage.



[Hanging of Juanita in Downieville, c 1893](#) is in the Public Domain.

White Women in the Far West

Once the United States acquired lands in the Far West, White families began moving into the area. Our imaginations often conjure up images of covered wagons drawn by yokes of oxen trudging across a vast prairie, driven by a man with a small woman beside him and several children peeking out from under the canvas. The reality, of course, was very different. Many women did come to the Far West as part of a nuclear or extended family, while others heeded Catharine Beecher’s call to become teachers, and still others were drawn by the opportunity to break with the rigid social norms of the East and chart a path of their own. While White settlers moved across the Mississippi river to settle in places like Missouri, Arkansas, and Iowa, the big push to the Far West came with news of gold in California.

Trials of the Trail

Although gold was actually discovered along the American River in 1848, news reached the world outside of California in

1849 and Gold Fever swept the country and many parts of the world, bringing millions into the newly acquired territory in just a few years. The Gold Rush itself was a very male affair, over 90% of the population of California were men during the early 1850s. When men heard about gold out west, many left their families to seek their fortune, while others dragged them along. One woman set fire to her family's wagon along the trail and another sat down on the ground and refused to move. But many women looked forward to moving west, either for their health, for a better life for their families, or because of their sense of adventure. Some were able to influence their final destination, encouraging their husbands to go to Oregon for farmland rather than to California for gold. We know this because many women kept diaries of their journey west, either on the California or Oregon Trail. The journey along the trails took between four and six months and were filled with exhausting physical labor, emotional suffering, illness, and death. Life went on for these women, who gave birth to and buried children along the way.

Mining Camps

Although fewer families traveled to California than Oregon, many did choose to try their luck at striking it rich in the gold fields. However, once arrived, most found that there were few jobs in mining but a lot of opportunity in providing services for the miners, such as cooking and laundry, as Luzena Stanley Wilson found out when a miner approached her as she was making dinner for her family outside of Sacramento in September, 1849, "I'll give you five dollars, ma'am, for them biscuit." It sounded like a fortune to me, and I looked at him to see if he meant it. And as I hesitated at such, to me, a very remarkable proposition, he repeated his offer to purchase, and said he would give ten dollars for bread made by a woman, and laid the shining gold piece in my hand." (Wilson Wright 1937, 10). Luzena and her husband sold their oxen and bought a hotel in which they fed and housed miners until a flood wiped them out. They moved to Nevada City and set up another hotel, which burned down, and so they ended up with a third hotel in the hills between San Francisco and Sacramento, and founded the town of Vacaville.

Dame Shirley

A great deal of what we know of life in mining camps comes from the letters of Louise Clappe, who wrote and published under the pen name "Dame Shirley." From September, 1851 to November, 1852 she wrote more than 20 letters to her sister Molly in which she described her life in mining camps along the Feather River. Her letters are sometimes serious, often humorous, and filled with details of daily life and the people she interacted with. In January, 1852, Louise wrote to describe the way the winter holidays were celebrated in the camp. She described a party that went on for several days, with dancing, eating, and a great deal of drinking. In another letter, she tells her sister that there were 29 murders the previous month, pointing out that the month had 30 days, and so they were still a day ahead. The fact that she is able to joke about murders as well as parties gives us a window into Louise's personality but also into the attitude she had to have in such rough conditions.



[Louise Clapp, "Dame Shirley" date unknown](#), is in the Public Domain.

Farming and Ranching

Most women who moved to the Far West settled on farms or ranches with their husbands and raised families. Like Spanish women before them, they learned to be self-reliant as their menfolk were gone all day in the fields or on business. Running a farm or ranch was difficult work, but it was not much different than what they had done as farmers' wives in the East. Women took pride in recreating domesticity in the rough log cabins and sod houses they found themselves in, creatively using worn out blankets as area rugs and pieces of old dresses as curtains. Some had carried a single doll or tea pot over the trail and were thrilled to be able to display these symbols of domestic life in their new homes. However, many women commented in their diaries and letters how lonely they were because their nearest neighbors were often 10 to 20 miles away. They talk about the isolation they felt, especially during pregnancy and childbirth, and they lamented that they had no friends. Nellie Wetherbee wrote in her diary: "I have been very blue for I cannot make a friend like mother out of Henry...It's a bore." (Sanchez 2000, 65). Sarah Hively wrote simply, "I never was so lonely and homesick in all my life." (Sanchez 2000, 65).

Some women moved to the Far West with other women to build their own lives separate from men altogether. After the Homestead Act of 1862, several groups of women applied for and acquired homesteads of their own, without the aid of a man, because the law allowed anyone, male or female, to apply. Still others began their lives in the Far West as part of a family but through the deaths of husband or father, inherited a farm or ranch and operated it alone. One of the earliest women to do this was Sally Scull, who moved to Texas while it was still a part of Spain and eventually owned a horse ranch where she employed vaqueros who were skilled in horsemanship. She reportedly wore pants and was an excellent marksman. Other renowned cattlemen include Elizabeth Johnson Williams, Margaret Heffernan Borland, and Susan McSween.



[Susan McSween, Cattle Queen of New Mexico](#) is in the Public Domain.

Legal Rights

White women who moved to the Far West brought the ideas they learned about true womanhood with them, continued to subscribe to *Godey's*, and adjusted the ideal to fit their new surroundings. Local governments trying to create safe, stable communities noted that where there were more women and families, there was less crime and lawlessness. In short, the west was a bit less wild. With this in mind, states and territories in the Far West gradually expanded women's rights throughout the 19th century, leading for some to even give women the right to vote long before the 19th amendment. For example, when Louise Clapp and her husband decided to separate in 1852, she eventually petitioned and was granted a divorce from a California judge, something virtually unheard of at the time. States began allowing women to own land and businesses regardless of their marital status, giving them a legal identity outside of their husband's and father's for the first time. In 1869, Wyoming gave women the right to vote and in 1898, Utah gave women the right to serve on a jury. While these milestones may seem slow and small, they were part of a steady march to social, economic, and political equality that moved from West to East.

African American Women in the Far West

The French and Spanish allowed slavery in their territories, so there were already a number of enslaved Africans in Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Missouri before the United States acquired these areas by treaty and they would not become free until after the Civil War in 1865. Before emancipation, most of the African Americans who moved to the Far West were taken against their will by their enslavers and, depending upon where they were taken, remained enslaved until 1865 as well. When the Cherokee, Creek, and other Southeastern tribes were removed to Oklahoma in the 1830s, they took their slaves with them, forcing hundreds of enslaved African Americans onto reservations where they continued to be enslaved until the 1890s when the Federal government began the Indian Census Rolls. However,

some states and territories in the Far West did not allow slavery and when enslaved people were taken to those areas, they were technically free. Claiming their freedom, however, was a different matter.

Biddy Mason

Born into slavery in Georgia, Biddy Mason and her family were sold to the Smith family in Mississippi, then taken to Utah in the Mormon Exodus and finally to California in 1852. California had outlawed slavery when it became a state in 1850, so it was illegal for Smith to keep Mason and her family enslaved. However, Biddy had to go to court for her freedom, which proved difficult because she lacked money and education, but also because it was illegal in California for a black person to testify against a white person. When she filed her petition, her enslaver failed to show up to court, and in 1856, Judge Benjamin Hayes granted Biddy and her family their freedom. Biddy used her skills as a nurse and midwife in the Los Angeles area, saving enough money to buy land, eventually owning several homes and businesses throughout the area. She was active in her community, helped the poor, and helped to found the first African Methodist Episcopal Church in Los Angeles. She was well known in the area for her kindness and generosity: “If you hold your hand closed, nothing good can come in. The open hand is blessed, for it gives in abundance, even as it receives.” (Weiler 2020)



[Biddy Mason, c 1860](#) is in the Public Domain.

Once the Civil War ended in 1865, the 13th amendment abolished slavery nationwide and over 3.5 million enslaved people became free. Most remained in the South until the early 20th century, when they moved north and west in the Great Migration. However, some moved to the Far West and worked as cowboys and ranch hands while others established communities of the formerly enslaved and their descendants. These communities gave African American women new opportunities as teachers, librarians, nurses, and shopkeepers, allowing them the freedom to control their own lives.

Asian Women in the Far West

The early 1800s saw small numbers of Asian immigrants from China, the Philippines, and South Asia, but their numbers dramatically increased beginning with the California Gold Rush in 1849. Gold Fever was so strong that Filipino sailors jumped ship in San Francisco and impoverished Chinese men left their homes and families with the hope of earning enough money to return home to give them a better life. By comparison, few Asian women immigrated to the Far West

during this time, but those who did were often assumed to be prostitutes, although many were the wives and daughters of businessmen, traders, and miners, not unlike Spanish and White women. The first documented Chinese woman to arrive in the United States was Afong Moy, who was brought in by White traders and used as an “exotic” prop to sell their goods before being sold to P. T. Barnum as a sideshow. She was degraded, dehumanized, and sexualized in the circus displays, which encouraged people to see Chinese women as exotic, foreign, and possibly dangerous. While Moy was the first Chinese woman to be abused in such a way, she would not be the last. Chinese women were sometimes sold into prostitution by their families because of abject poverty and many others were kidnapped by traders and sold to brothels in port towns and mining camps throughout the Far West. They were often popular with White customers, a fact that Ah Toy, a madame of her own brothel in San Francisco, took advantage of. She began her sex work by charging an ounce of gold for a “looker,” which was just a short peep show, and increased her fees from there. Although some Chinese women, like Ah Toy, became successful businesswomen, the overwhelming majority of Chinese women in sex work lived brutally short lives due to violence and disease.

While not all Chinese women were prostitutes, the stereotype that they were ultimately led to the passage of the Page Act of 1875, which barred Chinese prostitutes from entering the country, although since most Chinese women were assumed to be prostitutes, this meant a ban of Chinese women altogether. Then in 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, barring not only Chinese but many other Asian people from immigrating to the United States or becoming citizens. These two laws, plus the anti-miscegenation laws that prevented interracial marriage, the Chinese population dropped dramatically over the coming decades.



[Chinese Woman's Carte de Visite, c. 1870s California](#) from the Yale Collection of Western Americana is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic](#)

Conclusion

The Far West lives in the modern imagination as the “wild west,” a place where men gambled, drank, mined, ranched,

and drove cattle and the only women were saloon girls and prostitutes. This fantasy excludes the large number of Indigenous women who had called the Far West home for millennia and whose lives were permanently upended by European and American colonization. It also excludes the Spanish, White, and Asian women who immigrated to the region and built homes, schools, churches, and communities as well as the African American women who were taken against their will yet managed to survive and rebuild their lives after freedom.

Question to Consider

How does the idea of the Far West that is portrayed in films and television shows compare with the reality, particularly for women?

16. Women in the Civil War

Learning Objectives

- Describe the roles women served during the Civil War.

The Civil War, which began in 1861, disrupted life for most Americans for the better part of the decade, and for some, far longer. The war took the lives of over 700,000 men serving in both the Union and Confederate armies and caused the maiming of hundreds of thousands more during four years of brutal warfare. Most battles took place in the South, on farms and in small towns, which devastated the local landscape and economy and forced the civilian population, mostly women and children, to clean up the dead and care for the wounded left behind. Over the course of the war, nearly three million men served in both armies, allowing women to carve out new roles and careers as nurses, spies, and soldiers as well as filling the gaps men left on the Home Front.

Nursing

Before the Civil War, women had long served as their family's nurse and some women worked as midwives, but nursing as a profession was viewed as unladylike outside of the household. This attitude had begun to change during the Crimean War in the 1850s, thanks to the work of Florence Nightingale, who led a group of middle- and upper-class women to serve as nurses for the British army fighting in the Crimea. These women were heavily criticized early in the war, but the attitude towards them changed when it became obvious that their work was highly effective, saving countless men who would have otherwise died of their wounds or infection. Less than a decade later, American women used Nightingale's image and example to defend their work as nurses in hospitals and on the battlefield, serving Union and Confederate soldiers. Most historians agree that the death toll during the Civil War would have likely been double had it not been for the work of female nurses.

North

The women of the North were better prepared for the Civil War than those of the South in most respects. Middle and upper class women had access to education and were already well connected with one another through their local churches, schools, and reform activities, thus they were able to mobilize to help the war effort quickly. They held fund raisers for local hospitals and made care packages for local regiments. At the national level, men organized the United States Sanitary Commission to operate field and brick hospitals, but after the first major land battle of the war, Manassas, it became clear that the Commission needed new leadership to be effective.

Dorothea Dix

Before the Civil War, Dorothea Dix led a movement to reform the country's insane asylums and advocated for the rights of the mentally ill. Her work connected her with state legislatures, governors, and congressmen, which taught her the skills to navigate the world of government policies and procedures. In 1861, Dix brought her leadership and administrative skills to the U.S. Sanitary Commission and she became the Superintendent of Army Nurses. She oversaw the hiring and training of over 3,000 nurses to serve the Union Army in both brick and field hospitals and established strict standards of behavior for her nurses, who often called her "Dragon Dix" behind her back because of those standards, which included no one under 35 and no jewelry or hoops allowed. Dix was fearful that young women would become nurses in the hopes of finding a husband, but as the war dragged on, she became far less strict in her hiring practices, although she remained fervent that nurses should give excellent care to all in need, regardless of the uniform they wore. She served without pay for the duration of the war, and many of the nurses she trained went on to train the next generation of nurses. By the time of the next major American War in 1917, women had completely transformed nursing, largely thanks to Dorothea Dix.



[Dorothea Dix, date unknown](#) is in the Public Domain.

Clara Barton

Nicknamed the "Angel of the Battlefield," Clara Barton entered nursing in 1862, over a year into the war, but her work transformed the concept of field hospital care and emergency work. Before the Civil War began, Barton was working at the U.S. Patent office, and before that, she was a teacher. Like most volunteer nurses, she had no formal medical training, but as a child she spent a year caring for her brother after an accident on their family farm. During the first year of the war, Barton read the accounts of the high rate of battlefield casualties and began to collect money and purchase supplies to help the wounded. In September, 1862, the Battle of Antietam broke out nearby, and she decided that it was time for action; she hired six wagons, packed them with medical supplies, and drove them to the battlefield, where she immediately began caring for the wounded. While the battle still raged, Clara cared for the wounded by giving them water and binding their wounds, risking her life amongst the flying bullets: "A ball has passed between my body and the right arm which supported him, cutting through his chest from shoulder to shoulder. There was no more to be done for him and I left him to his rest. I have never mended that hole in my sleeve. I wonder if a soldier ever does mend a

bullet hole in his coat?” (Barton 1862, NPS). She continued to work through the night, caring for the wounded from both the Union and the Confederacy, prompting one surgeon to note later: “In my feeble estimation, General McClellan, with all his laurels, sinks into insignificance beside the true heroine of the age, the angel of the battlefield.”(Dunn 1862, NPS) Clara Barton spent the rest of the war caring for both Union and Confederate soldiers, and when the Union allowed African Americans to serve, she was one of the few White nurses willing to care for Colored troops. When the war ended, she traveled to Andersonville, Georgia, site of a notoriously brutal prisoner of war camp, and, through tireless interviews and letter writing, was able to identify nearly 20,000 of those buried in the unmarked mass graves at the prison. In 1881, Clara Barton lobbied congress to create the American Red Cross, which continues to provide assistance to people dealing with emergencies such as natural disasters and war.



[Clara Barton, 1865](#) by Matthew Brady is in the Public Domain.

“Mother” Bickerdyke

Women nurses were often not treated with respect, particularly by doctors and military leaders, who resented their presence in camp. However, some women refused to be disrespected by anyone and found unlikely supporters at the highest levels. Among these women was Mary Ann Bickerdyke, known as “Mother” Bickerdyke to the soldiers she cared for. When a letter from a local field surgeon decrying the filthy conditions at the hospital in Cairo, Illinois was read aloud in church, Bickerdyke was chosen to deliver supplies to him. Once there, she began working as a nurse and met leaders of the Sanitary Commission. “Mother” eventually became an administrator for Union hospitals and started more than 300 field hospitals, many in the Western theater, which was led by Generals Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman. She was immensely popular with the young enlisted men, but regularly challenged officers, who complained to Grant and Sherman about her behavior. Sherman is reported to have responded to such a complaint by saying, “She outranks me!” and told the complaining officer to do what Bickerdyke said. The general often referred to her as one of his best generals, and both he and Grant typically gave her whatever she asked for because they knew she was looking after their soldiers.



[“Mother” Mary Ann Bickerdyke, 1898](#) is in the Public Domain.

South

The Confederate States of America, which consisted of most Southern slaveholding states, struggled throughout the Civil War to care for its wounded because of its decentralized government and relatively poor population. They had no Sanitary Commission to organize hospitals and since most battles took place in the South, private homes frequently became hospitals and the women who lived there became nurses. Before the war, Southern women were more geographically and socially isolated than their Northern sisters, making it more difficult for them to organize to help the war effort.

Captain Sally Tompkins

While most Southern women were forced into nursing because of the battles that took place near their homes, Sally Tompkins used her own money to open a private hospital in Richmond, Virginia during the summer of 1861 and provided such good care that she lost only 3% of the soldiers she cared for. So successful was Tompkins' private hospital that when the Confederacy put all private hospitals under the command of the military, President Jefferson Davis offered her a commission in the Confederate Army so that her hospital could remain open. Captain Tompkins served the entire war without pay and nearly bankrupted herself to run the hospital rather than accept pay for her work. “I accepted the above commission as Captain in the CSA. when it was offered. But, I would not allow my name to be placed upon the pay roll of the army.” (Tompkins 1861, Mathews Co Historical Society)



[Captain Sally Louisa Tompkins, c 1860s](#) is in the Public Domain.

Spying

Both the Union and Confederacy developed elaborate spy networks during the Civil War, allowing courageous and well-connected women to actively participate in the war effort without suspicion, at least early on. Most of the spies we know about either wrote memoirs or were caught, such as Rose Greenhow, the infamous Belle Boyd, and Elizabeth Van Lew, but many others remain anonymous to history, providing useful information in an important moment before fading into obscurity.

Rebel Rose

Rose Greenhow was a Washington socialite who was well connected in the North and South. Her husband had been a government official, and Rose was well-traveled before he died, leaving her a wealthy widow with four daughters, the youngest of whom was her namesake. Before the war broke out, Greenhow was rumored to have had affairs with several political figures, most notably President James Buchanan, and her parties were the events of year. As tensions built during the Spring of 1861, many Southerners left Washington, but Rose remained and began using her social and political connections to gather information to pass to her friends in the South. She was able to use her friendships with several congressmen to uncover plans to invade Virginia in July, plans that she passed to Confederate General Beauregard, who was able to organize a defense that won the South its first victory of the war at Bull Run. Greenhow worked with other spies and helped to develop a cipher, which was used to encode messages amongst her spy network. Eventually, Rose was discovered and put under house arrest, but she continued to use her connections to gather intelligence, so she was moved to Capitol Prison and then banished to the Confederacy. In 1864, Rose Greenhow was returning from a trip to Great Britain for the Confederacy when her ship was discovered by the Union blockade. While attempting to escape the blockade in a rowboat, it capsized and Rose Greenhow drowned, being weighed down by both her heavy skirts and \$2,000 in gold that she earned from the sale of her memoir.



[Rose Greenhow and her daughter Little Rose, 1862 at Old Capitol Prison](#) by Mathew Brady is in the Public Domain.

La Belle Rebelle

Belle Boyd was among the best known and most notorious female spies of the Civil War, mostly due to self-promotion after the war. According to her memoir, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison*, she began her spying career after a Union detachment entered her home, insulted her mother, and attempted to raise the Union flag. Belle shot and killed one of the soldiers who had insulted her mother, and when the officer in charge arrived to investigate, rather than arrest her for murder, he gave her another pistol. They did put her under house arrest for a time, and it was through being in close proximity with Union soldiers that she began charming them out of information and reporting it to Colonel Turner Ashby of the Confederate Cavalry. She was freed from house arrest and began acting as a courier for several officers, most notably General Thomas Jackson, who referred to her in dispatches and thanked her personally for her help at the Battle of Front Royal, where she ran onto the battle field amidst gunfire that put holes in her skirts in order to provide information about the advancing Union army. Boyd became well known in spy networks and she was eventually captured and sent to Capitol Prison, where she eavesdropped on her guards and passed information to an unknown agent outside her window using rubber balls. She was traded as part of a prisoner exchange in August of 1862, then arrested again the following summer but released after she contracted Typhoid Fever and banished to the Confederacy. She married, had a daughter, and lived in Great Britain for a time after the death of her first husband. Belle and Grace returned to the United States after the war ended, where she published her memoir and eventually traveled the country as an actress and speaker, telling of her wartime exploits.



[Belle Boyd, c. 1862](#) Cover Image of *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison* is in the Public Domain.

Elizabeth Van Lew and Mary Elizabeth Bowser

The most successful spy of the Civil War, North or South, was Richmond socialite and Union spy Elizabeth Van Lew, who was raised in Virginia but opposed slavery and secession. Van Lew began spying by visiting Union prisoners of war at Libby Prison in Richmond. She and her mother brought food, blankets, and books to the men languishing in one of the South's most notorious prisons, but she also passed notes using secret compartments in teacups and books, and even helped some of the men plan a prison escape in 1863. When these men returned to the Union Army, they told their commanding officer, General Benjamin Butler, about the woman who had helped them and he recruited Van Lew as a spy. She used a cipher developed by Butler and developed a spy network of about a dozen, including Mary Elizabeth Bowser, a former Van Lew slave who worked in the Confederate White House. The Davis family took for granted that Bowser was ignorant and illiterate, which served her well as a spy in their midst. Not only could Mary read, she had what we now refer to as a photographic memory, which enabled her to read and memorize maps, dispatches, and other important information laying on President Davis's desk. Mary Bowser passed the intelligence she gathered to Elizabeth Van Lew, who in turn passed it to the Union Army as they planned their attack on Richmond. Grant told Van Lew, "You have sent me the most valuable information received from Richmond during the war." (Lineberry 2011)

Van Lew's spying was eventually discovered by her neighbors and she was shunned by society, lost her property, and became a social outcast at the end of the war. "[I am] held in contempt & scorn by the narrow minded men and women of my city for my loyalty ... Socially living as utterly alone in the city of my birth, as if I spoke a different language." (Lineberry 2011) When Grant became president, he appointed her Richmond's postmaster, a position she held for eight years until the election of Rutherford Hayes. Van Lew lived on the charity of former Union officer Paul Revere and his

family until her death in 1900. All record of Mary Bowser was destroyed when the Union took control of Richmond, presumably for her own protection. There are no known photographs of her, nor is anything known of her life following the Civil War or her death. It is important to note that without Mary Elizabeth Bowser's work in the Confederate White House, Elizabeth Van Lew's work would not have been nearly as effective.



[Elizabeth Van Lew, c 1870](#) is in the Public Domain. There are no known images of Mary Elizabeth Bowser.

Soldiering

Just as during the American Revolution, some women impersonated men and joined the army, some alongside husbands or fathers and others to escape arranged marriages, a desire for adventure, or a sense of patriotic duty. Many were able to join the military and served the duration of the war without discovery, while others were wounded and, once discovered, were given a dress and told to go home. A fascinating example of a female soldier who seemed to engage in all of the activities of women during the war was Sarah Emma Edmonds, who enlisted as Franklin Thompson in the Union Army after spending several years impersonating a man to escape an arranged marriage. She served in several major battles, then applied to be a Union spy, using her talents of impersonation to gather intelligence in disguise. Eventually, Edmonds was injured and, fearing discovery, left the army and became a nurse. She eventually published a memoir, *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army*, donating the profits to various veterans' charities.



[Sarah Emma Edmonds as Franklin Thompson, c. 1860s](#) is in the Public Domain.

Camp Followers

Just as their grandmothers did, thousands of women followed their husbands, fathers, and sons to war as camp followers, cooking, cleaning, and nursing their menfolk, as well as others they served with, helping to keep up morale among the soldiers. Camp followers prepared meals and did the wash, which allowed the men to rest between battles. They also acted as nurses for the wounded and sick. While most of these women were not formally trained, they used the skills they learned caring for their families at home to care for the soldiers suffering from a variety of illnesses, such as typhoid and influenza, as well as to mend their wounds after battle. Unlike Sanitary Commission nurses, camp followers were unpaid and unrecognized by either Union or Confederate leadership or even most historians, despite their contributions to troop care and morale.



[*Anonymous Camp Follower with her husband and three children, c. 1862*](#) is in the Public domain.

On the Homefront

Most women did not serve as nurses, spies, soldiers, or camp followers during the war, choosing instead to remain home, caring for their children and community, operating the family farm or business and anxiously awaiting news of their husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons. As the war dragged on, travelers in the Midwest noted that the fields were full of women and children, performing all of the backbreaking labor required to run a farm. These women and their urban dwelling sisters who worked in factories took up the work left by the men who volunteered or were drafted into military service. In the South, women were not only faced with having to manage farms and perform the labor; they also had to contend with theft and looting from both the Union and Confederate armies as they moved from battle to battle. As previously mentioned, these women often had to clean up the mess left on their farms after the armies moved through, caring for the wounded, burying the dead, and replanting crops. Unfortunately, for many women, North and South, their struggles did not end when the war ended.



Cotton dress worn throughout the Civil War by Cornelia Augustus Wheeler in Duxbury, Vermont. Family lore said she was wearing it when her husband returned and he said he never wanted to see it again because it was so threadbare and patched. Item is in the Vermont History Museum, Montpelier. Photo by Rene Miller Paredes, 2025.

In many small towns and rural regions, men volunteered to serve in the local regiment, which stayed together for the duration of the war, fighting together and, sadly, dying together. In one small town in Iowa, only the drummer boy returned out of more than 200 soldiers. 2% of the nation's population died as a result of the Civil War. 1 in 5 Southern men under the age of 44 was killed, and thousands more men were maimed, losing arms or legs or suffering other wounds, which made it difficult to return to their pre-war lives. For the women in their families, this meant that life would never return to normal. Hundreds of thousands became widows and orphans, and thousands of mothers were left without the support of their sons. Men who had been grievously injured or maimed returned home invalids, forced to rely on their wives, mothers, sisters, even children for care and support. The Civil War would continue to cost both the United States' government and the state governments of the former Confederacy millions of dollars in pensions and veterans' care. In 1866 alone, the government of Mississippi spent nearly half its annual budget on artificial limbs for maimed Confederate veterans. The physical and emotional suffering that began during the Civil War would continue to plague America's women for generations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Civil War was a time of incredible upheaval for the United States and all who lived within its borders. Some women established themselves as nurses, continuing to work and train others in the field, even writing textbooks that were used to teach generations of nurses, while others chose this time of tumult to challenge well-established gender roles by becoming spies or even soldiers. It is easy to become enamored by the extraordinary adventures and achievements of these women, but it is important to remember that most women contributed to the war effort by remaining where they were, ensuring that their menfolk had a home, a farm, and a business to return to when the war finally ended.

Question to Consider

Why does society allow women to push against boundaries during wartime and why don't those changes seem to stick once the war is over?

PART IV

WOMEN IN THE GILDED AGE THROUGH THE ROARING 20S (1865-1929)

17. Immigrant Women in the Gilded Age

Learning Objectives

- Describe the new work experiences of women in post-Civil War America.
- Explain why women became involved in unionization during the Gilded Age.

Immigration in the Gilded Age

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

The poem above, *The New Colossus*, written by Emma Lazarus in 1883, is one of the best known poems in American history. While she wrote this poem to raise money for the pedestal for the Statue of Liberty, it has come to symbolize the immigrant story in the United States, that it is a nation that welcomes the poor who are looking for freedom. Although some immigrants are welcomed with open arms, the vast majority face discrimination, economic struggles, and social anxiety as they attempt to navigate the new country. This is true of immigrants throughout United States history, but during the decades between the Civil War and World War I, the nation saw an unprecedented number of immigrants enter its borders, over 25 million by most estimations, with nearly 10 million entering between 1900-1910. Previous waves of immigrants had come mostly from Northern and Western Europe, like the Irish, German, English, and Nordic peoples, but the new wave of immigrants came from Southern and Eastern Europe and included Italians, Greeks, Poles, Jews from the Russian Empire, and scores of others. Most did not speak English, nor did they have an education, job skills, or much money. Some came as single men, but most came with their families or women traveling alone with children to join husbands who had already immigrated, and still others came as single women.

Americanization

Most immigrants moved into the cities along the East coast, like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, and crowded into poor and working class neighborhoods, living in tenement apartments with outdoor privies or a shared bathroom per floor and working in factories 12-16 hours a day, 6 days a week, for a few cents a day. Immigrants from the same region recreated their old homes as much as they could, living in the same building or same city block, forming ethnic neighborhoods for mutual support and safety. Women formed the backbone of these communities, particularly mothers with young children and women too old to work, as they helped their neighbors with childcare while they went to work in the factories. Women were also the focus of “Americanization” efforts by churches, community organizations, unions, and the government, largely because they were the ones who raised the children, who were the next generation of Americans. Programs to teach the new arrivals English and about American culture sprung up in cities with large immigrant populations, from New York City to Chicago, even along the border, like El Paso. These settlement houses, as they were called, were run by churches or social workers and provided classes in English, culture, and hygiene aimed at housewives, and some even employed visiting nurses who provided care for pregnant and new mothers in their homes. These programs provided much-needed support for many immigrants, particularly women, but they also pushed assimilation to the detriment of the women’s home cultures.

Factory Work

Following the American Civil War, the Industrial Revolution picked up steam and the United States became one of the world’s leaders in manufacturing and trade. Immigrants provided much-needed and cheap labor for the production of coal, steel, parts for the burgeoning railroads, and textiles, just to name a few. Before the Civil War, women and children dominated the textile industry and it would continue to be that way during the Gilded Age. Viewed as a cheap and docile workforce, they worked in the textile mills and factories that had spread to all major cities in the United States, making cloth or sewing shirtwaists, a blouse worn by women all over the country, in terrible conditions. Factories often had no windows or very small ones, which were kept closed all the time, making the rooms sweltering hot and stuffy. Doors were also locked to prevent workers’ theft of both material and time through extended breaks. Pay was very low, a few cents an hour, and workers’ pay was docked for the materials they used. Beginning in 1909, garment workers in New York City went on strike to demand better wages and working conditions. These strikes continued intermittently for the next two years and spread to other urban centers, such as Philadelphia and Chicago. Sometimes the unions were able to gain some relief for the workers in the form of a small raise, but they were not widespread, and, for the most part, no one was particularly concerned about the comfort or the lives of the millions of women and girls who toiled in the factories. This lack of concern eventually had deadly results in the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, which is discussed in the following video.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://pressbooks.whccd.edu/usherstory/?p=68#oembed-1>

The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire has come to symbolize everything that was wrong with the Gilded Age, from deadly working conditions to not holding owners accountable, but it could have been prevented with some simple safety measures, some of which had been demanded by labor unions.

Not all women who worked for wages worked outside their homes in factories. For women with young children,

piecework from home allowed them to earn money and watch over their children, often employing them to help with the work, as shown in the photograph below by Lewis Hines.



[*Widow and son rolling papers for cigarettes, 1909*](#) by Lewis Hines is in the Public Domain.

Whether working in a factory or doing piecework from home, women earned about half of men's salary, and children earned half of women's salary. For example, in 1899, the average man earned \$597 per year, while the average woman earned \$314. Women and children were often preferred to men by factory owners because they were cheaper and perceived to be more docile, and most Americans believed that men should earn more than women because they were expected to be the breadwinner of the family. Pay equity under the law is still decades away for American women.

Domestic Service

In addition to factory and home piecework, scores of immigrant women found work in the homes of middle- and upper-class families as domestics, performing a myriad of household chores from laundry and cleaning to cooking and gardening, as well as child care and hairdressing. Wealthy families typically employed several domestic servants with set responsibilities, such as one servant as the head cook and another to clean the kitchen, several to clean the house, several assigned to laundry, and so on. Most middle class families could not afford an army of domestic servants to perform all of the housework, so they often hired one or two maids to assist the woman of the house, who not only supervised but also worked alongside. Even families of modest means tried to hire out the most hated household chore, laundry, either by sending the washing out to a service or hiring a laundress to come to their home once a week to do the wash. The large number of immigrant women and girls arriving during the latter half of the 19th century provided plenty of workers to choose from, so having at least one domestic became less of a luxury to even lower-middle-class families.

For the women who worked as domestics, the work was often no less backbreaking than factory work and often just as dangerous. Cleaning was done using physical strength, as most modern household conveniences were still decades away. Soap was either made at home or purchased, but it was made of lye and irritated skin. Pair lye soap with scalding wash water, and scores of women suffered burns from doing the laundry. Cooking was still done using a wood stove and fire, which could cause accidental burns to death. Rugs had to be pulled out of the house and beaten to remove dust and debris, which required either several maids or the brute strength of a single woman. In addition to injuries on the job, domestic servants were often propositioned or raped by their employers or their sons and if pregnancy resulted, the maid was terminated without a reference, meaning she could not find employment elsewhere. Without the safety

net of public services, these women were often turned out of their own communities and forced into prostitution to feed themselves and their child. There were usually no consequences for the man.



[Irish Domestics, c. 1900](#) is in the Public Domain.

Conclusion

In conclusion, women from immigrant families struggled to survive during the Gilded Age. Because they lacked formal education and often spoke limited English, they were forced to take what jobs they could to support their families, often with tragic results. These women made these sacrifices so that their children could live better lives than they had, and they were successful in this regard. By the early 20th century, their daughters, educated in the United States, were able to break out of factory work and enter new jobs, known as Pink Collar due to the prevalence of women.

Question to Consider

How have the lives of immigrants changed since the Gilded Age?

18. African American Women

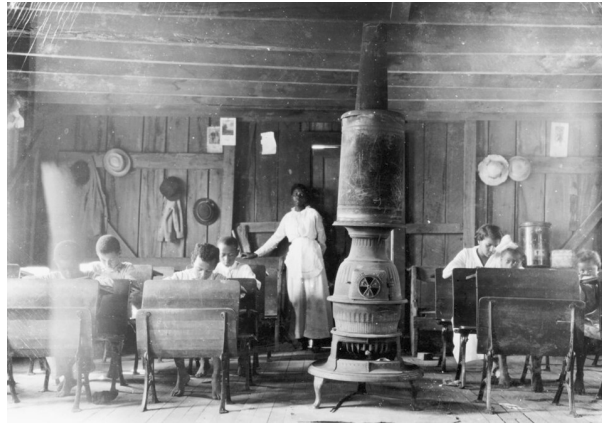
Learning Objectives

- Describe the limitations Jim Crow placed on African Americans.
- Describe what was meant to “Elevate and Refine” the race.
- Explain the importance of African American women in cosmetology.

The years following the Civil War through World War I were known as the Gilded Age because it was a time of immense progress and invention but also poverty and struggle for the lowest classes of Americans. For the African American community, it was a time of progress and advancement in the midst of the legal discrimination system known as Jim Crow and leaders such as Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois encouraged women to lead their families and communities both within Jim Crow and in the fight against it.

Reconstruction and Jim Crow

It is impossible to understand the experiences of women of color during the Gilded Age without first understanding the era of Reconstruction and Jim Crow. Reconstruction refers to the decade following the Civil War, when three important amendments to the Constitution redefined life for people of color in the United States. The 13th amendment abolished slavery & indentured servitude (except for punishment for crime), the 14th amendment ensured citizenship for all of those born or naturalized in the U.S. as well as guaranteed equal protection for all citizens under the law, and the 15th amendment gave Black men the right to vote. These three amendments effectively made Men of Color equal to White men under the law, but a series of laws that segregated the Black community from the White and made voting all but impossible for Black men were enacted throughout the United States. These laws were known collectively as Jim Crow, after a derisive minstrel character portrayed by White actors in Black Face. Jim Crow laws allowed segregation in all social settings, including schools and public transportation, and were upheld by the Supreme Court’s Plessy v. Ferguson “separate but equal” ruling in 1896. Further, many states in the former Confederacy enacted poll taxes and literacy tests designed to prevent African American men from voting. By 1900, less than 5% of Black men in the South were registered to vote due to discriminatory voting practices. In addition to the legal means of Jim Crow, Whites used terrorism, such as beatings and lynchings to prevent African Americans from exercising their Constitutional rights. While most lynching victims were men, the photograph below shows a woman and her son who were lynched in Oklahoma in 1911. The exact number of Black victims of lynching is unknown, but estimates range from 4,000 to 6,000 between 1865 and 1920.



[Black female teacher & her students, c 1900](#) is in the Public Domain.

College-Educated Women

Women of color answered the calls of Washington and DuBois by enrolling in college, earning degrees, and serving their communities in a variety of ways. Since most colleges and universities in the United States did not allow people of color, the Black community created their own system of higher education, known today as Historically Black Colleges and Universities, or HBCUs. Like the rest of the university system in the country at the time, education was typically segregated by gender even within HBCUs, with men and women attending classes separately, although some colleges had co-ed programs, such as the Fisk University Jubilee Singers (pictured below).

Men and women formed Greek organizations, collectively referred to today as the Divine 9, four of which are sororities. The first Black sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha, was founded at Howard University in 1908 and was eventually followed by Delta Sigma Theta in 1913 and Zeta Phi Beta in 1920. These three Howard University sororities, along with Sigma Gamma Rho, founded in 1922 at Butler University, formed the basis for the social and political activism of many college-educated Black women throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century, including woman's suffrage, anti-lynching, desegregation, and voting rights, a fight that continues today. In 2020, Delta Sigma Theta member Stacey Abrams organized massive voter turnout in Georgia that is credited with the state electing two Democratic Senators and the victory of Kamala Harris, Alpha Kappa Alpha member, as Vice President of the United States.



[Jubilee Singers of Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, 1875](#) is in the Public Domain.

African American Cosmetology

Since the arrival of their ancestors from Africa, Black women were expected to conform to White women's beauty standards, and hair was a particularly distinctive concern for African American women. Beginning in the Colonial period, African hair was referred to as "wool" or "nappy" and women were encouraged to either keep it covered with a cloth or tightly braided. The idea of "good" hair for Black women was a head of loosely curled or straight hair, similar to that of White women, while "bad" hair was tightly curled or kinky, and the goal was then to attempt to straighten "bad" hair so that it looked like that of White women. However, the process of either covering or straightening the hair often led to scalp problems and hair loss, which only encouraged women to cover their hair out of embarrassment. This situation changed in the late 19th century with Annie Malone and Madam C. J. Walker, the first Black female millionaires.

Madam Walker suffered from hair loss herself and had attempted a variety of hair treatments before she met Annie Malone, who had already established a business developing and selling hair care products for Black women's hair, including hair straighteners and hair growers, which she sold door-to-door. Malone's product became so popular that she trained other women to demonstrate and sell the product, including Sarah Breedlove Davis, later known as Madam C. J. Walker after her third husband.

While Sarah and Annie eventually had a falling out over the copyright to Malone's hair grower, both women were instrumental in developing beauty products for African American women and became important employers for Black women throughout the United States. Malone founded Poro College, a cosmetology school where she trained women to go door-to-door, demonstrating and selling her product; these women were called Poro Agents. Eventually, Malone created not only hair care products but also a full line of cosmetics, including cold cream, lipstick, and face powder developed to match Black women's complexions. Walker, on the other hand, continued to develop hair care products, including *Wonderful Hair Grower*, and created her own cosmetology school called Lelia, where graduates were called "hair culturalists." Poro and Walker Agents sold their products door-to-door, demonstrated how the product worked, and provided samples for potential customers. Annie Malone and Madam C. J. Walker not only built their own businesses and provided employment for thousands of African American women; they were the first to market beauty products specifically for Black women and the unique needs of their hair and skin.



[Annie Malone & Madame C. J. Walker, c 1900](#) is in the Public Domain.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the post-Civil War period was a time of challenge and progress for the African American community. Black leaders like Washington and DuBois encouraged women to become educated, start businesses, and be role models for the community, thereby uplifting the entire race as a result. As a result, African American women attended college,

worked to obtain civil rights, and created business opportunities for themselves, all of which did uplift the Black community.

Question to Consider

Why did the Black community emulate the White community after the Civil War?

19. Pink Collar Jobs

Learning Objectives

- Describe the emergence of “Pink Collar” jobs during the latter half of the 19th century.
- Explain how “Pink Collar” work reinforced the patriarchy.
- Analyze how the Cult of Domesticity influenced the development of teaching, nursing, and social work as “Pink Collar” occupations.

Pink Collar Jobs

During the Gilded Age, retail and office work transformed, creating jobs that became synonymous with women workers because they involved serving others. Department stores developed and grew during the latter half of the 19th century and into the 20th century, relying on young, pretty, and fashionable women to sell their products while offices began to employ women as bookkeepers, secretaries, and telephone operators. As the nation's population increased, particularly in immigrant neighborhoods, the need for teachers, nurses, and a new discipline, social work, also increased, and women continued to fulfill this demand. These occupations came to be known as Pink Collar jobs.

Sales Girls and the Freedom of the Department Store

Before the Civil War, people tended to purchase items that they needed from local businesses and craftsmen, who made them to order; only the wealthy engaged in what is commonly referred to today as shopping, or browsing for items to purchase. However, by the late 19th century, the mass production of items such as clothing and shoes meant that people with means could purchase an item off the rack from among a choice of premade items. In large cities, stores began employing pretty young women as sales girls to assist the wealthy in choosing the right item and to convince them to buy more than what they needed. These salesgirls were often paid by commission, or by sale, which encouraged them to sell more to their customers.



[Detroit, Michigan Department Store, c 1910](#) is in the Public Domain.

Retail work was a golden opportunity for working-class girls to leave the factory or domestic service and work in a clean, respectable environment. Second-generation immigrant girls, who had been raised in the US and spoke English well, viewed a sales clerk position as far more desirable than a dangerous factory or working as a domestic servant. While the positions did not pay well, they afforded the girls the opportunity to work amongst fashionable garments and accessories and to remain relatively clean and safe throughout their workday. Girls flocked to apply for these positions, using them as a stepping stone out of the tenements and into the upper working class or even the lower middle class.

In addition to providing a new and respectable occupation for working-class women, department stores provided freedom now previously known to most women, regardless of class. Because the spaces were female-dominated, women could go shopping and spend an entire day among other women, having lunch or tea, trying on garments, or purchasing items for their household with their female friends and being waited on by women. Shopping was a way women could spend time outside of the home without threatening men's position in society the way that activism often did, and because the stores were occupied only by other women, they were safe spaces where women could be themselves.

Office Work

The end of the Civil War gave rise to more and larger businesses, which required more men to manage the workforce and the day-to-day operations. These new opportunities for men also opened up opportunities for women to work as bookkeepers, typists, and secretaries. Office work tended to reinforce the patriarchy of the home as women were expected to act as domestic help or junior partners to their male bosses.

Bookkeepers and Typists

The typewriter and the adding machine became staples of the office workspace by the end of the 19th century, and almost immediately, women were stereotyped as best for these jobs because they required fine dexterity but were also viewed as low skill. Office managers viewed women's domestic skills, such as sewing, as a good preparation for learning to type on a typewriter or adding machine. Women were also already skilled in maintaining a household budget, so those same skills were applied to the business world. For more than a century before computers, typing, record keeping, filing, and other menial but important office jobs were performed by women who earned little pay and received little respect, although, like retail, these jobs were viewed as a step above factory and domestic service.



[Typing Pool, 1918](#) Department of the Navy is in the Public Domain.

Secretaries

Like bookkeepers and typists, secretaries were a vital position in most offices beginning in the mid-19th century. Secretaries employed at small businesses were often the typist and bookkeeper, but at large businesses, secretaries worked in a large office with other women, answering phones, making appointments, and performing other organizational tasks for their male employers.

Personal secretaries, on the other hand, were the highest level of office worker, often having other secretaries working under her while performing a myriad of tasks for her male boss, who was often high in management. In addition to organizing their boss's work day, a personal secretary was expected to fetch meals and drinks and perform other personal errands for her manager. In many ways, working as a personal secretary was the pinnacle of a woman's place in the office environment, but they were still viewed as little more than a domestic servant by the men in charge.



[Personal Secretary, 1912](#) is in the Public Domain.

Hello Girls

For the first century after the invention of the telephone, switchboard operators, nearly all female, connected callers from private numbers or within a large business. Like other Pink Collar jobs during the 19th century, the pay was low, but it allowed a young woman to work off her feet in a clean space, often amongst other women. Early on after the telephone was invented, few American families had one, and so the operator was not particularly busy. But by the early 20th century, more American households had a telephone, making the job of the operator extremely important to the community and leading to an expansion of the job throughout the United States. In small towns, the operator was usually well known by name, and she often knew all of the gossip since she was able to eavesdrop undetected on the calls she connected. In larger cities, operators worked in large rooms and oversaw dozens of call lines, which did not allow for much eavesdropping. Although it was an extremely important job, telephone operators were viewed as menial workers with low pay, but it was still a vast improvement over factory work.



[Woman working telephone switchboard, c. 1900](#) is in the Public Domain.

The Caring Professions

Teachers and Librarians

Before the Civil War, women were making major inroads into education, both as students and as teachers. The ideal of Republican Womanhood that followed the Revolution combined with the Cult of Domesticity that developed in the Antebellum period to cement in the minds of most people in the United States that women were the best teachers, particularly of young children. Male and female educators encouraged women to enter education as an extension of the home and motherhood, especially if a woman was unmarried or widowed. Then, during the Civil War, men left teaching in droves to join the army and most chose not to return because of the business and work opportunities afforded them during the Gilded Age. By the late 19th century, most teachers in the United States were female, and it has continued that way up to the present day. Many districts had strict requirements for their female teachers, such as rules regarding appearing in public spaces with men, courtship, and most required women to step down or be fired from their jobs if they married. A teacher's day started at dawn, when she arrived at the school to sweep; clean the desks, chalkboard, and slates; and start the fire in the classroom stove. She alone supervised the children, who usually ranged in age from 6 to 16 in one classroom, including during recess and lunch, and meted out discipline ranging from verbal admonishments to the switch. Once the children left for the day, she spent several hours cleaning the classroom and stove again before

retiring for the day. If the teacher worked in a rural district, her home may have been a small room off the classroom in the same building, or she may have boarded with one of her students. In larger and urban districts, home was likely a boarding house or a house she shared with other teachers that was built by the district.

Even before the Civil War, middle- and upper-class women collected money to purchase books for local lending libraries as an extension of their domestic sphere under the Cult of Domesticity. However, after the Civil War, local governments and philanthropists became involved in creating libraries that were accessible to all, regardless of age or income. As with teaching, women were the natural choice for library work due to their image as mothers, caring and supportive, and so the library became another extension of the domestic sphere. Librarians worked in city libraries, guiding patrons to find the right book and promoting literacy, and in rural environments, often taking the library to the people in horse-drawn wagons or on pack mules. Once automobiles became readily available, mobile libraries were commonplace in small towns and rural communities across the United States, driven by female librarians, encouraging literacy and connecting people to books as never before.

Schools and libraries provided women with respectable jobs that could lead them to a good marriage or allowed them to support themselves and serve their communities. They could also enter leadership positions without threatening men, since public education was considered an appropriate realm for women. For example, Mary Foy became the first female head librarian of the Los Angeles Public Library in 1880, at the tender age of 18. She held the post for just four years, but during that time, she expanded women's access to library collections and set up the card catalog. She went on to teach elementary and high school throughout Los Angeles county and was a local supporter of women's suffrage.



[Mary Foy, c 1880](#) by the Los Angeles Public Library is in the Public Domain.

By the early 20th century, women were firmly established as teachers and librarians in the United States just as compulsory schooling for children through 8th grade was becoming common. Because they involved children and education, they were viewed as an extension of the domestic sphere and provided respectable work for single women, one of the “caring professions.”

Nursing

Women have always been nurses for their families and neighbors, caring for their husbands and children, and helping neighbors do the same. They learned, largely through trial and error or from other women, how to treat illnesses, bring down a high fever, set broken bones, and maintain a sanitary environment in order to help their family stay healthy.

However, most nursing in hospitals was done by members of religious orders, such as the Daughters of Charity, who founded hospitals in Europe in the 1600s, the Sisters of Saint Joseph in France, or the Sisters of Mercy, who founded the first hospital in the United States in the 1830s. It was considered unseemly and unladylike for women outside of religious orders to care for sick men who were not their family members, and the few who did were often looked down upon as prostitutes. This attitude changed gradually thanks to the Cult of Domesticity and the necessity of war.

In 1856, the Crimean War broke out in Eastern Europe and thousands of men served in a way that resembled the Civil War that broke out in the U.S. five years later. The tactics used by officers were outdated and no longer fit the weapons being used, and diseases swept through military camps as men from all parts of Europe were crammed into close quarters. Deaths due to disease were a major problem, just as they would be in the Civil War. Men and women from religious orders established hospitals to help the wounded and sick, as they had done for centuries, but this time they were joined by a group of Middle Class women led by Florence Nightingale, who had put out a call in the papers for women to extend their domestic sphere to the battlefield, serving their country as they served their family, and over two hundred women heeded her call. Five years later, Middle and Upper Class women in the United States, inspired by Nightingale and her troop of nurses, organized and operated hospitals, worked as nurses, and even attended to the wounded on the battlefield while bullets flew around them. While we remember these women as heroes today, saving the lives of thousands of men, at the time they had to fight for the work they were doing. Doctors, officers, soldiers, and politicians complained about their presence, especially in camp and field hospitals. After the war, many of them continued working as nurses and created a new career path for women.

One of the most famous Civil War nurse, Clara Barton, went on to found the American Red Cross in 1881, an organization whose mission was, and still is, to assist in times of disaster and peril, from natural disasters to warfare. Still other nurses went on to teach in the nursing schools that were beginning to pop up throughout the Northeast, the first being the New England Hospital for Women and Children, which created a year-long training for nurses. In 1885, Clara S. Weeks Shaw wrote *A Textbook of Nursing*, which was the first nursing textbook in the United States. Scores of nurses studied Weeks Shaw's textbook in school and used it as a reference on the job.

As Jim Crow segregation grew after the Civil War, many Black women became nurses as a career choice and also because it helped their communities, who in many cases were not allowed in a "White" hospital. In 1879, Mary Eliza Mahoney became the first African American woman to graduate from nursing school, having attended the New England Hospital for Women and Children. Like the female nurses serving in Crimea and the Civil War, she experienced discrimination not only for her sex but also for her race, and although she was able to work as a private nurse for several wealthy white families, she noted that she was often treated as a household servant rather than a professional nurse. In 1896, Mahoney became the first Black nurse in the Nurses Associated Alumnae of the United States, later the American Nurses Association, where she continued to advocate for nurses of color. She went on to found the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses in 1908, where her work on behalf of nurses of color continued.



[Mary Eliza Mahoney, c. 1880s](#) is in the Public Domain.

By the end of the 19th century, women were firmly established in the field of nursing, although it would be decades still for them to be able to practice medicine as doctors. Nursing was considered an extension of the domestic role of motherhood, joining teaching as another “caring profession” that unmarried women were able to perform with respectability.

Social Work

The increase in immigration in the latter half of the 19th century meant more people crowded into urban areas and a higher concentration of poverty in the cities than before the Civil War. Similar to nursing, charity for the poor was traditionally managed by churches, who worked in their local communities to help poor families and individuals, often women and children, who had fallen on hard times. As urban centers grew, the need outgrew individual churches’ abilities and new ideas about how to help the poor emerged during the Gilded Age.

Most religiously based charities were managed by women of the Middle and Upper Classes because they had the time and money to spend on helping others and because helping poor women and children was considered an extension of the domestic sphere. Secular charity boards, those not connected to a religious institution, were often filled with the names of local businessmen’s wives, who used their husband’s money to help the poor and furthered his influence and reputation in the process. As the 19th century progressed and more middle- and upper class women became educated, some chose to remain single and move into community service occupations such as Charity Organizations Societies and Settlement Houses, both of which served the urban poor through education and health care.

One of the founders of social work as a scientific discipline was Mary Ellen Richmond, who spent decades helping the urban poor and wrote five books describing not only her experiences but also the methods she used to help them. Her early work was as a caseworker, called Friendly Visitor at the time, and required her to visit needy women and

children within her community, ascertain their needs, and attempt to secure help for them. From this work, Richmond wrote *Friendly Visiting Among the Poor*, which provided a handbook for charity workers, identifying specific behaviors and situations they needed to look for and laying out her ideas about social circumstances that caused poverty rather than the individual's weakness or vice. She eventually moved into a leadership role at the Russell Sage Foundation, an organization founded by Margaret Sage to research social problems using the scientific method. With the support of the Russell Sage Foundation, Mary was able to publish several more books in which she explained data collection and research methods and focused more on her ideas about the circumstances that cause poverty. Mary Richmond's works developed social work as an academic discipline but also as another "caring profession" extension of domesticity.



[Mary Ellen Richmond, 1894](#) is in the Public Domain.

Conclusion

The Gilded Age was a time of tremendous change and growth for the United States, but it also provided opportunities for women to move outside of their traditional roles as wives and mothers. Young working class women were able to move from factory and domestic work to telephone operator, secretary, or department store sales girl. While these jobs didn't necessarily pay better than factory work, they were cleaner, safer, and offered a step towards the Middle Class. Women from the Middle and Upper Class had more access to education than ever before, and many used this access to become teachers, nurses, and social workers, extending the domestic sphere into the "caring professions" that women still dominate today.

Question to Consider

What other occupations are considered "Pink Collar" today, and why?

20. Progressive Reform and the New Woman

Learning Objectives

- Analyze women's involvement in the Settlement House, Birth Control, and Temperance Movements.
- Compare and contrast the ideas of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Emma Goldman.
- Compare the methods of the various women's suffrage organizations.
- Describe how women finally gained the right to vote.

The Gilded Age witnessed a great many changes in society, including the increase in immigration, poverty, wealth gaps, racial violence, and worker abuse. A new group of activists, called Progressives, began to advocate for social, economic, and political changes that would improve the lives of all Americans, particularly the most vulnerable. Women from all walks of life joined labor unions and social organizations to work for the improvement of their own situations and that of their communities. Women whose families could afford college sent their daughters to universities, where they studied teaching, nursing, and social work, which allowed them to become active in the Progressive Movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and effect social and political changes such as protective laws for women and children and amendments such as prohibition and women's suffrage.

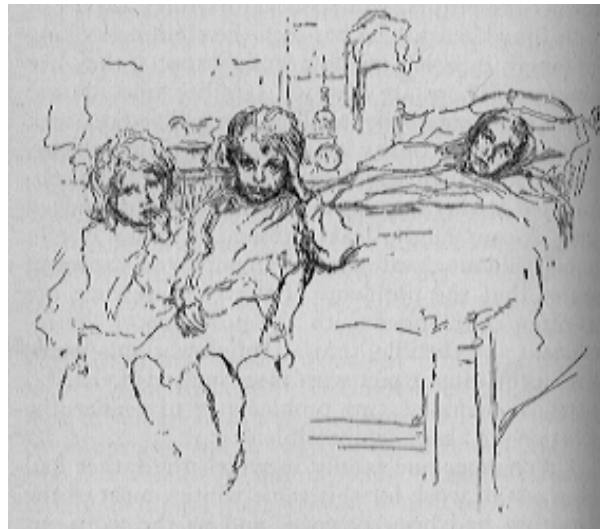
College Girls

During the Gilded Age, a college education was not required for most occupations. Even law and medicine were apprenticed occupations where students studied under a licensed professional for a number of years until they were ready to take the Bar exam or set up their own medical practice. In 1910, about 5% of Americans had a college education, but of those, 40% were women. Male-dominated universities rarely admitted female students, and co-educational institutions were controversial. Therefore, women typically attended all-female universities, such as Vassar, Wellesley, Bryn Mawr, Radcliffe, and Mt. Holyoke, where they studied female-appropriate subjects like teaching, nursing, and social work, often referred to as the “caring professions,” and were acceptable because they were viewed as an extension of the domestic sphere. Women were rarely able to study law, ministry, or medical doctoring during this time, and even if they did earn a degree in these fields, the professional organizations such as the American Bar Association and the American Medical Association refused to allow women. The teachers and administrators at these institutions were also female, providing a professional pathway for graduates. Most college graduates married later in life or not at all, a situation lamented by a Radcliffe graduate: “I hang in a void midway between two spheres. A professional career...puts me beyond reach of the average woman's duties and pleasures...the conventional limitations of the female lot put me beyond the reach of the average man's duties and pleasures.” (Quoted in Riley 2007, 184)

The Settlement House Movement

Among the first progressive activists were women who worked among the poor and immigrant communities in large urban areas during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Cities like New York and Chicago were inundated with newly arrived immigrants who needed housing, work, English language classes, and health care. Social reformers, mostly women, saw a need and met it through the creation of settlement houses; one of the best known was Hull House, founded in 1889 by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr in Chicago.

The women who worked in the settlement houses were typically from middle- or upper-class families with a college education in teaching, nursing, or social work. They used the skills they learned in college as well as their social networking skills and family connections to secure funding for their work helping the poor and immigrant communities adjust to their new lives in the cities of the United States. Teachers set up English language classes for children and adults alike, helping newly arrived immigrants learn about the language and culture of the United States. Nurses established clinics to provide health care and sanitation education for the poor while visiting nurses traveled into the neighborhoods checking on women who were pregnant or had just given birth and those too frail to come to the settlement house. Social workers kept records of the needs of the families served by the settlement houses, using this data to advocate for protective legislation such as limiting child labor and increasing sanitation.



[*Sketch of sick mother and children in tenement*](#) from *Twenty Years at Hull House* by Jane Addams (1910), p. 164 by NkFoy is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International](#)

Settlement House workers such as Addams and Starr eventually turned their work into real reforms for urban poor and immigrant communities. During the early 20th century, laws prohibiting the employment of children under the age of ten were passed along with workman's compensation for those injured on the job, urban sanitation development, and a wide variety of safety standards for factories. The early work of settlement houses throughout the cities of the United States served as a schoolroom of its own for future progressives like Frances Perkins (Secretary of Labor under FDR) and Eleanor Roosevelt (First Lady to FDR). Perkins, Roosevelt, and others were able to transform early progressive laws into national social programs such as Social Security during the Great Depression.

Birth Control Movement

Women have always attempted to control the number of children they had, whether through pregnancy prevention or

abortion. Preventing pregnancy was often done through consuming various herbs or using barrier methods learned from other women with results ranging from successful prevention to the woman's death. English Common Law had little to say about these methods, and abortion was typically allowed before "quickening," which is when the mother felt the baby move, usually around the fourth month of pregnancy. Some public health advocates encouraged the use of condoms, sometimes called sheaths, to prevent the spread of venereal diseases, particularly during the Civil War. All of these methods, regardless of efficacy, came under fire by the "purity" movement that enveloped the middle class and many politicians, leading to the passage of the Comstock Laws in 1873. The Comstock Laws forbid the mailing of lewd or pornographic materials (which included birth control information) and prevented doctors and nurses from discussing birth control with their patients. Upper and middle-class women who wanted to access birth control were generally able to do so thanks to the ease of trans-Atlantic travel during the Gilded Age, which enabled women of means to travel to France, where birth control was legal, to acquire diaphragms and smuggle them into the country for themselves and their friends. But for poor and working-class women, there was no such black market for birth control.

Many Progressive reformers saw birth control as a means to achieve several goals. Fewer pregnancies meant healthier women, which often meant healthier children when the woman decided to have them. Fewer pregnancies also meant fewer children, which meant more resources to go around to each child. Margaret Sanger, who was a nurse and outspoken advocate of birth control, was raised in a poor family and watched her mother endure multiple miscarriages, give birth to 11 children, and die at age 50. When Sanger became a nurse, she worked in the immigrant neighborhoods of New York City, where she watched scores of women endure what her mother went through while doctors were powerless to help and could only give advice like telling women to have their husbands sleep on the roof. When one of her patients died after attempting to give herself an abortion, Sanger decided to do something, first by publishing several newspaper articles about women's sexuality, then a magazine, *The Woman Rebel*. Since *Rebel* was mailed, she was arrested in 1914 for violating the Comstock Laws, and while she was awaiting trial, she wrote *Family Limitation*, a pamphlet in which she described several contraception methods. Her charges were eventually dropped, but less than two years later, Sanger opened a birth control clinic in Brooklyn in 1916 with the help of other nurses and anonymous women donors. Her clinic was open only a few days before she was arrested again for violating the Comstock Laws. This time she was convicted and served 30 days in jail. Margaret Sanger continued to advocate for contraception, which she often referred to as family planning, eventually founding Planned Parenthood in 1921. Birth control would not become legal for all women in the United States until *Griswold v. Connecticut* in 1965.



[Sanger Clinic in Brooklyn, October, 1916](#) is in the Public Domain.

Radical Feminists: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Emma Goldman

While the vast majority of college-educated, progressive women were working on social causes, a few envisioned sweeping changes to family life and gender dynamics, drawing on socialist ideas. These women were ahead of their time, even by modern standards, and most of the changes they advocated for have yet to materialize.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was the niece of the reform-minded Beecher sisters, Harriet, Catharine, and Isabella, who helped raise her after her father abandoned the family while she was an infant. The influence of her aunts and her father's abandonment likely played a critical role in Charlotte's development. Three of her works, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *Herland*, both fiction, and *Women and Economics*, presented her ideas for the transformation of gender relations. While Gilman supported women's suffrage, she did not believe that women's equality would be achieved through the vote. Instead, she argued that women would have to change their culture or mindset regarding their relationships to men, in particular the power dynamics within marriage. Charlotte recognized that women worked far harder in marriage than men did and advocated for the professionalization of housekeeping and childrearing. Finally, she argued that marriage was essentially a bargain wherein men promised to financially care for women in exchange for domestic service and sex.

Gilman's ideas were echoed in the work of Emma Goldman, a Lithuanian immigrant and anarchist who worked within the labor movement in the United States during the Gilded Age. Like Gilman, Goldman saw marriage as a bargain or contract between men and women that kept women in a state of dependence upon men. She argued that laws would not make women equal to men but that women must change their culture. "True emancipation begins neither at the polls nor in court. It begins in woman's soul." (Goldman 1906)

Political Reform

Before the Civil War, many women were involved in reform movements such as the abolition of slavery, temperance, and some advocated for suffrage. When the Civil War ended in 1865, the 13th amendment abolishing slavery was added to the Constitution, thus putting an end to the abolitionist movement and giving birth to the movement for racial equality. However, some former abolitionists and congressmen advocated for an amendment to give voting rights to African American men. Women like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who had advocated for abolition, pushed for the amendment to include women, but amendment advocates were afraid it would not pass if they did this. The 15th amendment was added to the Constitution in 1868, preventing discrimination in voting rights based on race, color, or previous condition of servitude, but not sex. This omission split the racial equality movement and the suffrage movement, which, along with the temperance movement, had largely been put on hold because of the Civil War. After 1868, both movements ramped up again and would end with the addition of two new amendments to the Constitution in 1920.

Temperance

The temperance movement started long before the Civil War and had had some local success, such as the passage of the Maine Law in 1851, which prohibited the production, sale, and distribution of alcohol in the state of Maine. During the Civil War, temperance advocates encouraged soldiers to abstain from alcohol, or at least not drink excessively, but the strain of military life meant that alcohol flowed freely in both armies. After the war ended, the moral reformers of the old temperance movement found partners in new places, factory owners and reformed alcoholics, to spark a national

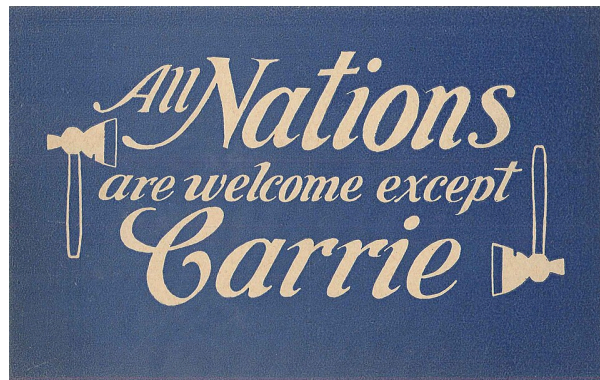
movement. While not all temperance advocates were women, they formed the core base and often became symbols of the movement.

Women's Christian Temperance Union

In 1873, a group of Ohio women led by Matilda Carpenter formed the Women's Christian Temperance Union with the intent to end the production, sale, and distribution of alcohol, starting at the local level but with the goal of making the whole country dry. In 1879, Frances Willard became the president of the WCTU and pushed to broaden the group's goals to include more social and political reform, including linking it with the suffrage movement and gender equality. Women temperance advocates argued that alcohol abuse harmed women by subjecting them and their children to abusive husbands and fathers and that it left them economically vulnerable when their men drank away the rent money. They also argued that alcohol use caused political corruption, since elections usually occurred in bars and saloons, and they supported the idea that women should have the right to vote in order to clean up the political mess caused by men. Willard famously said "Do Everything-because everyone can do something!" (Willard, NWCTU)

Carrie Nation

While Frances Willard and the WCTU collected signatures for petitions, organized rallies and parades, and wrote extensively about the need for temperance, Carrie Nation and a small group of women in Kansas took matters into their own hands, literally. The nation's first husband, Charles Gloyd, had been a severe alcoholic and ultimately died of alcoholism shortly after they separated. She remarried a few years later, but her experience with Gloyd created a strong hate for alcohol that informed the rest of her life. She joined her local WCTU chapter and pushed Kansas to enforce its own laws, which banned the sale of alcohol. Nation and other women stood outside saloons, singing hymns to the men inside and, in one instance, throwing rocks. A few months later, she began taking an ax with her to her protests and hacked up the saloons, for which she was frequently arrested for "hatchetations" as she called them. Like Willard, Nation supported women's suffrage as a way to further the cause of temperance and clean up politics.



[Postcard from 1910](#) is in the Public Domain.

The temperance movement successfully passed the 18th amendment, which banned the production, sale, and distribution of alcohol throughout the United States. So we could say the movement was successful. However, just 13 years later the amendment was repealed by the 21st. During those 13 years, Americans not only continued to drink, they risked life and limb to do so through organized crime rings ranging from country moonshiners to Al Capone. Ultimately, prohibition as a social movement was a failure.

Suffrage

Women first stated their demand for the right to vote in the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, but it was not a popular idea at the time because most women, influenced by the Cult of Domesticity, still viewed politics as outside of their proper sphere. However, as more women moved to the Far West and enjoyed the right to own property, access the courts, and vote in local election, and still more women joined in Temperance and Progressive reform movements, support for women's suffrage grew. Women began to view the vote as a tool they could use to make their world a better place, protecting women and children, which was a part of the domestic sphere.

Splintered Movement

After the Civil War, the woman's suffrage movement was joined with former abolitionists into the American Equal Rights Association (AERA), which included prominent reformers from before the war such as Lucy Stone and Frederick Douglass, as well as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. When the 15th amendment passed, giving men of color the right to vote but not women, the organization splintered, with Anthony and Stanton forming the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and Stone forming the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), both in 1869. The two organizations shared the goal of woman's suffrage but differed in their methodologies. For example, NWSA encouraged their members to vote in elections in order to challenge male only laws in court. In 1872, Anthony and several other women attempted to vote in the presidential election and were arrested. *United States v. Anthony* proceeded, but Anthony was not allowed to speak until the verdict of guilty was reached, at which time she criticized the entire proceeding as a violation of her rights since she was not allowed to speak on her own behalf or have a trial by a jury of her peers, as women were not allowed to serve on juries. In 1875, the Supreme Court ruled in *Minor v. Happersett* that the Constitution did not confer the right to vote on anyone, which meant that the NWSA would have to amend the Constitution in order to gain the vote for women.



[Lucy Stone in 1881](#) by Ida Bothe is in the Public Domain.

National American Woman's Suffrage Association

From 1869 to 1890, the NWSA and the AWSA waged the same battle to enfranchise women in the United States. Lucy Stone published *The Woman's Journal* while Susan B. Anthony published *The Revolution*, both with the intent of arguing for the need for women's suffrage. They argued that women needed the right to vote because they were citizens and entitled to equal protection as laid down by the 14th amendment. They referred back to the ideals of the American Revolution and the importance of representation in the law, particularly taxation without consent. When presented with the argument that a woman's place was in the home, not in politics, they countered that women's unique experiences could improve politics and society in ways that men's could not. Finally, in 1890, the NWSA and the AWSA merged into the National American Woman's Suffrage Association (NAWSA), led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. By this time, congress had voted down a woman's suffrage amendment several times, and so the NAWSA had moved from a campaign for a national amendment to a state-by-state campaign for women's right to vote.



[Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, c. 1900](#) from the Library of Congress is in the Public Domain.

A New Generation of Suffragists

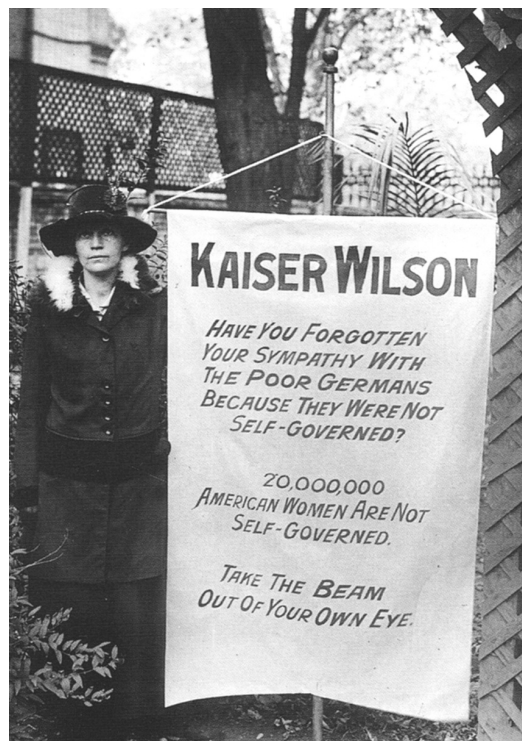
On March 3, 1913, the NAWSA held a parade in Washington, D.C., to draw attention to their movement. By then, all of the founders of the movement were dead, and a new generation of women took up the suffrage cause, including Carrie Chapman Catt, Harriot Stanton Blatch (daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton), Lucy Burns, Alice Paul, and Inez Milholland, among scores of others. Over two million people were members of NAWSA, making it the largest social reform organization in the United States at the time. In the presidential election in 1912, the Progressive Party, formed by former president Theodore Roosevelt, had endorsed women's suffrage and added it as a plank in their party platform. But Woodrow Wilson, not Roosevelt, won the election, and his inauguration was to take place on March 4. Ten states, all in the Far West, had given women the right to vote, but the movement for a national amendment was stalled. New energy was needed to push suffrage across the finish line. The parade, described in the video below, was intended to be this new energy.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.whccd.edu/usherstory/?p=82#oembed-1>

The parade and the following congressional inquiry kept suffrage in the headlines for months, adding to the momentum of the movement. But once again, the movement would split into rival groups when Alice Paul formed the National Woman's Party (NWP) in 1916 and actively campaigned against the Democratic party in that year's election because they refused to take up the suffrage amendment even though they controlled the executive and legislative branches of the government. Unfortunately, her campaign failed, and Wilson was reelected. The following year, the United States entered World War I, and many suffragists feared their cause would be sidelined by yet another war. Instead, the NWP began picketing the White House, stationing its members at the gates from sun up to sundown, six days a week, rain or shine. The picketers, called the Silent Sentinels by Blatch, held signs advocating for women's right to vote and criticizing Wilson's call to defend democracy in Europe while women in the United States did not have the right to vote.

Jailed for Freedom



[Virginia Arnold, Silent Sentinel, 1917](#) is in the Public Domain.

Signs like the one in the photo above infuriated President Wilson and many others who saw them as divisive and unpatriotic during wartime. In the summer of 1917, police began arresting the protesters, a few at a time, on the charge of obstructing traffic, which typically carried a fine. However, the women refused to pay the fine, since they were protesting on a public sidewalk and believed the charges were a ruse to silence them. After multiple arrests, the D.C. police no longer had room for the women, and they were sent to Occoquan Workhouse in Virginia, where they were stripped of their clothing and subjected to such abuse that the event was dubbed the *Night of Terror*. In 1920, Doris

Stevens, one of the women who endured the abuse, published a book called *Jailed for Freedom* in which she tells of what the guards did to the women while they were in prison. She described them beating and then hanging Lucy Burns by her wrists to her cell door so that she had to stand on her toes all night. The guards pushed Dora Lewis into her cell so hard she hit her head and was knocked unconscious; her frightened cellmate, Alice Cosu believed Lewis was dead and suffered a heart attack. When Alice Paul was arrested, she protested the mistreatment and terrible conditions in the prison by going on a hunger strike, a tactic she learned while working with British Suffragettes. News of the women's treatment eventually reached the press, and they were released.

19th Amendment

On August 26, 1920, the 19th amendment to the Constitution was ratified by the required 3/4 of the states. It reads: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." (National Archives). Its passage marked the end of a movement that began 72 years earlier at Seneca Falls, New York, and involved the work of three generations of American women and men. The only signer of the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions to survive to cast a ballot in 1920 was Charlotte Woodward. The fight for suffrage was over, but the work to educate and integrate women into politics was just beginning.



[NWP Headquarters celebrating the 19th amendment on August 26, 1920](#) from the Library of Congress is in the Public Domain.

Conclusion

College-educated women used their education and networks to foster social and political change in the United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Settlement House and Birth Control movements tried to improve the quality of life for poor and immigrant communities in urban areas, while the Temperance movement worked to protect women and children from the abuses of alcohol. Woman's Suffrage brought these movements together under a single banner, recognizing that enfranchisement would enable women to make the changes they wished to see in society. Unfortunately, this banner excluded women of color, who worked for these same goals, plus racial equality, within their own organizations.

Question to Consider

Why do you think many people today aren't active in politics and voting?

2I. Progressive Women of Color

Learning Objectives

- Identify the African American women who led the Progressive and Suffrage Movements.
- Analyze the connections Black Progressive women made between race, sex, and economics.

The story of Progressivism and the Suffrage movement has traditionally been taught from the perspective of White Americans. Indeed, there is little attention given to Women of Color and a desire by women's rights activists to sideline or silence their voices. However, we have learned that Sojourner Truth refused to be silenced, taking the stage and speaking without permission of the organizers, and she was not the only one. Women such as Ida B. Wells Barnett, Mary Church Terrell, and Amy Jacques Garvey, along with a host of others, organized and spoke out against the combined issues of sexism and racism during the early 20th century.

Ida B. Wells Barnett

One of the most notable women of color of the Progressive Era was Ida B. Wells Barnett, a journalist, activist, and co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The video clip below discusses Wells Barnett's work as a journalist in the anti-lynching crusade, which was a primary focus of the NAACP and a major concern for her personally. Ida was also involved in the National Association of Colored Woman and the National American Woman's Suffrage Association, both of which worked to gain the right to vote for women, albeit separately since many White suffragists refused to work with women of color. Wells-Barnett often pointed out that Black women existed at the intersection of race and gender discrimination, and she stressed the importance of ballot access for men and women of color.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.whccd.edu/usherstory/?p=90#oembed-1>

Mary Church Terrell

Like Wells, Mary Terrell was born at the end of slavery and dedicated her life to racial equality. Terrell formed the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), which worked to gain education and access to the ballot for African Americans during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and was also a founding member of the NAACP. She believed that voting rights were the key to racial and gender equality in the United States, and she recognized that she

belonged “to the only group in this country that has two such huge obstacles to surmount...both sex and race.” (Michals 2017) Today, historians refer to Terrell’s observation as “intersectionality.” In her 1898 speech entitled *The Progress of Colored Women*, Mary Church Terrell explains the struggles women of color experience, but she also lists many of the accomplishments of Black women in an attempt to counter the narrative of inferiority so popular in her time.

“When one considers the obstacles encountered by colored women in their effort to educate and cultivate themselves, since they became free, the work they have accomplished and the progress they have made will bear favorable comparison, at least with that of their more fortunate sisters, from whom the opportunity of acquiring knowledge and the means of self-culture have never been entirely withheld. Not only are colored women with ambition and aspiration handicapped on account of their sex, but they are almost everywhere baffled and mocked because of their race. Not only because they are women, but because they are colored women, are discouragement and disappointment meeting them at every turn. But in spite of the obstacles encountered, the progress made by colored women along many lines appears like a veritable miracle of modern times. Forty years ago for the great masses of colored women, there was no such thing as home. Today in each and every section of the country there are hundreds of homes among colored people, the mental and moral tone of which is as high and as pure as can be found among the best people of any land.

To the women of the race may be attributed in large measure the refinement and purity of the colored home. The immorality of colored women is a theme upon which those who know little about them or those who maliciously misrepresent them love to descant. Foul aspersions upon the character of colored women are assiduously circulated by the press of certain sections and especially by the direct descendants of those who in years past were responsible for the moral degradation of their female slaves. And yet, in spite of the fateful heritage of slavery, even though the safeguards usually thrown around maidenly youth and innocence are in some sections entirely withheld from colored girls, statistics compiled by men not inclined to falsify in favor of my race show that immorality among the colored women of the United States is not so great as among women with similar environments and temptations in Italy, Germany, Sweden, and France.

Scandals in the best-colored society are exceedingly rare, while the progressive game of divorce and remarriage is practically unknown.

The intellectual progress of colored women has been marvelous. So great has been their thirst for knowledge and so Herculean their efforts to acquire it that there are few colleges, universities, high schools, and normal schools in the North, East, and West from which colored girls have not graduated with honor. In Wellesley, Vassar, Ann Arbor, Cornell, and in Oberlin, my dear alma mater, whose name will always be loved and whose praise will always be sung as the first college in the country broad, just and generous enough to extend a cordial welcome to the Negro and to open its doors to women on an equal footing with the men, colored girls by their splendid records have forever settled the question of their capacity and worth. The instructors in these and other institutions cheerfully bear testimony to their intelligence, their diligence and their success.

As the brains of colored women expanded, their hearts began to grow. No Sooner had the heads of a favored few been filled with knowledge than their hearts yearned to dispense blessings to the less fortunate of their race. With tireless energy and eager zeal, colored women have worked in every conceivable way to elevate their race. Of the colored teachers engaged in instructing our youth it is probably no exaggeration to say that fully eighty percent are women. In the backwoods, remote from the civilization and comforts of the city and town, colored women may be found courageously battling with those evils which such conditions always entail. Many a heroine of whom the world will never hear has thus sacrificed her life to her race amid surroundings and in the face of privations which only martyrs can bear.

Through the medium of their societies in the church, beneficial organizations out of it and clubs of various kinds, colored women are doing a vast amount of good. It is almost impossible to ascertain exactly what the Negro is doing in

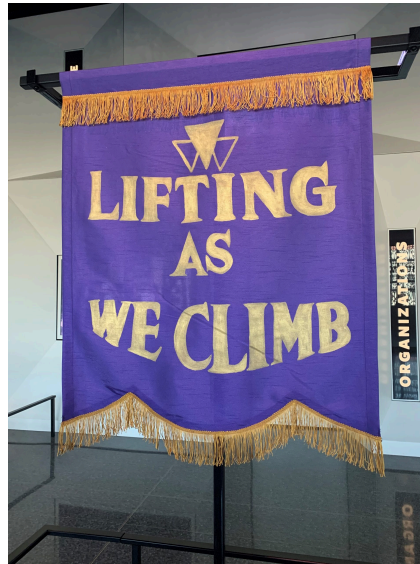
any field, for the records are so poorly kept. This is particularly true in the case of the women of the race. During the past forty years there is no doubt that colored women in their poverty have contributed large sums of money to charitable and educational institutions as well as to the foreign and home missionary work. Within the twenty-five years in which the educational work of the African Methodist Episcopal Church has been systematized, the women of that organization have contributed at least five hundred thousand dollars to the cause of education. Dotted all over the country are charitable institutions for the aged, orphaned and poor which have been established by colored women. Just how many it is difficult to state, owing to the lack of statistics bearing on the progress, possessions and prowess of colored women.

Up to date, politics have been religiously eschewed by colored women, although questions affecting our legal status as a race are sometimes agitated by the most progressive class. In Louisiana and Tennessee colored women have several times petitioned the legislatures of their respective states to repel the obnoxious Jim-Crow laws. Against the convict-lease system, whose atrocities have been so frequently exposed of late, colored women here and there in the South are waging a ceaseless war. So long as hundreds of their brothers and sisters, many of whom have committed no crime or misdemeanor whatever, are thrown into cells whose cubic contents are less than those of a good size grave, to be overworked, underfed and only partially covered with vermin infested rags, and so long as children are born to the women in these camps who breathe the polluted atmosphere of these dens of horror and vice from the time they utter their first cry in the world till they are released from their suffering by death, colored women who are working for the emancipation and elevation of their race know where their duty lies. By constant agitation of this painful and hideous subject, they hope to touch the conscience of the country, so that this stain upon its escutcheon shall be forever wiped away.

Alarmed at the rapidity with which the Negro is losing ground in the world of trade, some of the farsighted women are trying to solve the labor question, so far as it concerns the women at least, by urging the establishment of schools of domestic science wherever means therefore can be secured. Those who are interested in this particular work hope and believe that if colored women and girls are thoroughly trained in domestic service, the boycott which has undoubtedly been placed upon them in many sections of the country will be removed. With so few vocations open to the Negro and with the labor organizations increasingly hostile to him, the future of the boys and girls of the race appears to some of our women very foreboding and dark.

The cause of temperance has been eloquently espoused by two women, each of whom has been appointed national superintendent of work among colored people by the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. In business, colored women have had signal success. There is in Alabama a large milling and cotton business belonging to and controlled by a colored woman, who has sometimes as many as seventy-five men in her employ. Until a few years ago the principal ice plant of Nova Scotia was owned and managed by a colored woman, who sold it for a large amount. In the professions there are dentists and doctors whose practice is lucrative and large. Ever since a book was published in 1773 entitled "Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral by Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant of Mr. John Wheatley," of Boston, colored women have given abundant evidence of literary ability. In sculpture we were represented by a woman upon whose chisel Italy has set her seal of approval; in painting by one of Bouguereau's pupils and in music by young women holding diplomas from the best conservatories in the land. In short, to use a thought of the illustrious Frederick Douglass, if judged by the depths from which they have come, rather than by the heights to which those blessed with centuries of opportunities have attained, colored women need not hang their heads in shame. They are slowly but surely making their way up to the heights, wherever they can be scaled. In spite of handicaps and discouragements they are not losing heart. In a variety of ways they are rendering valiant service to their race. Lifting as they climb, onward and upward they go struggling and striving and hoping that the buds and blossoms of their desires may burst into glorious fruition ere long. Seeking no favors because of their color nor charity because of their needs they knock at the door of Justice and ask for an equal chance." (Terrell 1898)

Terrell's motto, which became the motto of the NACW, is embossed on this banner which is housed at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.



NACW Banner, National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2020, Photo by author.

Amy Jacques Garvey

Born and raised in Jamaica, Amy Garvey was the second wife of civil rights activists Marcus Garvey, leader of the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). She came from a privileged background, descended from the first mayor of Kingston, and became a writer and journalist, editing the UNIA's newsletter *The Negro World*. The Garvey's were among the first to advocate for Pan-African emancipation and for people of African heritage to return to Africa. They organized a company of passenger ships, called *The Black Star Line*, to transport African Americans to Africa. Like Ida B. Wells Barnett and Mary Church Terrell, Amy Jacques Garvey advocated for education and independence for people of color but went further by advocating separation and nationhood for the descendants of African slaves.



[Marcus and Amy Jacques Garvey, 1922](#) is in the Public Domain.

Conclusion

African American women recognized the dual nature of the discrimination that they faced, against both their race and sex, and they worked tirelessly to remedy both. Wells, Terrell, and Garvey were able to attain an education for themselves and all three women used their education to become leaders, a voice for women of color throughout the United States and the world. They believed that power for the Black community would be found through the economic and political power of men and women of color.

Question to Consider

What do you think the biggest concern was for women of color during the Progressive Era?

22. The Great Migration

Learning Objectives

- Describe the reasons for the Great Migration.
- Describe the impact of the Harlem Renaissance on both the Black and White communities.

The Great Migration was a large movement of African Americans from the Southern part of the United States to the North and West during the 20th century. Historians estimate that approximately six million men, women, and children of color left the South, with most leaving during the World War period. They left to avoid the Jim Crow segregation and lynchings that caused them to live in constant fear in the South and moved to cities that had jobs in factories and offices, work they had never done before and in an urban environment which was also unfamiliar, having come from the rural South.

Migration Push-Pull

African American women played a large role in the Great Migration, moving with their families and also alone from the rural South to urban centers in the North, such as Detroit, Chicago, and New York as well as cities in the West, such as Los Angeles and Oakland. Most migrated in hopes of a better life for themselves and their families, seeking better paying jobs, financial independence, and an escape from the brutality of the Jim Crow South. Their move was also driven by job opportunities created by the growth of industry during World War I and the Roaring 20s, then by poverty during the Great Depression, and once again job opportunities thanks to World War II. Once they arrived, women of color found that racism and brutality existed in the North and West as well, but they also found economic and social opportunities that did not exist in the South.



[Three generations of African American family arrives in Chicago, 1922](#) is in the Public Domain.

Urban Life in the 1920s

Women of the Great Migration had to adjust to life in the urban environment, which was very different from the rural South of their upbringing. Many were able to obtain jobs in factories or shops, while others continued working as domestic servants, but not in the same way they had in the South. African American women refused “live-in” service and instead took a wage, worked set hours, and lived in their own apartment, which gave them the opportunity to enjoy their own lives, independent of their employer. This new found freedom gave women the ability to participate in the social and political life of the African American community in the North, helping to create a network of charity and self-help organizations as well as develop new cultural movements, such as the Harlem Renaissance.

While some migrants enjoyed success in the North, others struggled to find housing and work due to myriad factors from racism to bad luck. Middle class Women of Color in cities like New York and Chicago created organizations like the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) to help poor African American women avoid lives of crime and prostitution. Groups like the NAACP and NACW provided funds for education so that people of color could acquire better paying jobs and achieve financial independence.



[Three women in Harlem, 1925](#) is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International](#).

Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural movement centered in Harlem, New York following World War I. African American writers redefined what it was to be Black in America and musicians, singers, and dancers brought music such as Jazz and the Blues to White audiences, where it entered the main stream through the availability of radio. Women such as Ma Rainey, Mother of the Blues, and Bessie Smith, Empress of the Blues, were able to make their living as entertainers in the Speak Easies and Jazz Clubs of Northern cities and eventually as recording artists. Their music explored themes of love and romance, hard times and good times, and lesbian relationships. These two Blues singers paved the way for other female singers and performers, such as Billie Holiday, Etta James, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and Aretha Franklin.



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In addition to singing, the 1920s brought in a new era in dance that became synonymous with the social and cultural changes that were occurring. Audiences went to night clubs to listen to bands and watch professional dancers and cabarets. Harlem's Cotton Club was the center for Black cultural exchange. One of the most famous dancers of the era was Josephine Baker, who was born in St. Louis, Missouri and worked as a vaudeville entertainer throughout the United States before traveling abroad and eventually spending the rest of her life in France. The video below features Baker performing the infamous Banana Dance in France in 1928.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.whccd.edu/usherstory/?p=101#oembed-3>

Conclusion

African American women were pivotal to the success of the Black community during the Great Migration of World War I and the 1920s. They formed social and political organizations to help fight against poverty and racism in their new homes, and created a place for themselves in the arts during the Harlem Renaissance.

Question for Consideration

How do you think Black women felt to move to the North and West and away from the South for the first time?

23. World War I and the Roaring 20s

Learning Objectives

- Describe women's participation in World War I.
- Analyze how WWI impacted women.
- Describe women's political activities following gaining the right to vote.
- Explain why feminism declined after 1920.
- Analyze the cultural changes that occurred during the 1920s.
- Describe the origin and lifestyle of young women during the 1920s.

The era of World War I through the end of the 1920s witnessed dramatic changes for women in the United States. The country entered its first global conflict in Europe and once again American women were asked to fill in for men on the home front as they had done in previous wars and also in Europe as nurses and other support for the army. When the war ended, women gained the right to vote with the passage of the 19th amendment, which gave them a voice in their government on a national level for the first time in history. The freedom experienced by women during World War I, the political freedom of the vote, and the rise of new technology such as the automobile and cinema created a seismic shift in the culture of the United States during the post-WWI era.

Women in World War I

World War I began in Europe in 1914, but the United States did not enter the fray until 1917, after Russia surrendered and the German army threatened to overrun British and French allied positions in France. The country was not prepared for war and was forced to recruit, train, supply, and transport millions of troops in a matter of months. The United States needed its men and its women to win.

Military and Battlefield Service

In the previous wars we have studied, such as the Revolution and Civil War, women were not officially allowed in combat and were discouraged from working on the frontlines. World War I changed this trend in part because European powers, who had been at war for three years already, had been forced to employ women in combat or near the frontlines and found that their presence made a positive impact. Organizations such as the American Red Cross employed thousands of female nurses and nearly 100 female doctors to care for wounded and injured soldiers and civilians in British and French hospitals near the front lines in France. The U.S. army employed women as ambulance and truck drivers, carrying the wounded from the trenches to hospitals and bringing supplies and troops to and from the battlefield, as well as telephone operators who spoke English and French for the Signal Corps near the front. Over 3,000 nurses served with the United States Army Nurse Corps and the United States Navy Nurse Corps in hospitals or on

hospital ships during the war. Approximately 12,000 women enlisted in the U.S. Navy as Yeoman-F, taking advantage of a loophole in the law that allowed women to serve in this capacity; they served on the home front so that men could serve in combat. Still others worked with the American Red Cross and Salvation Army as “Donut Dollies,” serving donuts and coffee to help the morale of the soldiers as they rotated to and from the front. The vast majority of these women never received recognition or benefits for their service.



[U.S. Signal Corps Operators in France, 1918](#) is in the Public Domain.

On the Home Front

Just as they had done in previous wars, women kept domestic life going and provided much needed labor in factories and on farms during World War I. As African American writer Alice Dunbar Nelson said in 1918, “The women worked as ammunition testers, switchboard operators, stock takers. They went into every kind of factory devoted to the production of war materials, from the most dangerous posts in munition plants to the delicate sewing in aeroplane factories.” (Quoted in *Women in WWI*).

A number of women did not support U.S. involvement in World War I or were pacifists who did not support war of any kind. Both in Europe and in the United States, these women formed organizations such as the Woman's Peace Party to encourage their government not to go to war or to negotiate peace as quickly as possible. Many of these women argued that, although they themselves did not fight, they were wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters of those who did fight and they did not want to lose their loved ones. Still others, such as Jeannette Rankin, who was the first woman to serve in the House of Representatives, were ardent pacifists who did not believe in war under any circumstances. She was so dedicated to pacifism that she voted against U.S. entry into World War I and again into U.S. entry into World War II twenty years later.



[*Delegates to the Women's Peace Conference, 1915*](#) by George Grantham Bain is in the Public Domain.

The United States was only involved in World War I for a little over a year, but it was long enough to make a number of lasting changes for women. For example, women were able to join and serve in the military, albeit in women's auxiliaries and not directly in combat roles until much later, and both the army and navy used female nurses in military hospitals from World War I onward. The war also gave women clerical opportunities in government service, jobs that often paid better than those in the private sector.

Women's service in World War I, both on the home front and in Europe, earned them some cursory respect from elected officials, including President Woodrow Wilson, who mentioned their service to the country as a reason why congress should support the suffrage amendment. The social, economic, and political changes that occurred during World War I changed women's lives during the 1920s.

Women and Politics in the 1920s

Most women viewed suffrage as the main issue that prevented gender equality in the United States, but some women understood that suffrage was not the end of the women's movement but just a stepping stone towards full equality. The 1920s saw the decline of White women's political activism while Women of Color took advantage of their newly won right to vote to fight against lynching, and radicals such as Alice Paul advocated for yet another change to the Constitution, the Equal Rights Amendment.

The League of Women Voters

After the passage of the 19th amendment, the National American Women's Suffrage Association changed its name to the League of Women Voters and its focus became educating women about their newly won right to vote. The League organized classes in civics and held voter registration drives to help women become voters. The organization was led by White middle- and upper-class women, who in turn targeted other White middle and upper-class women, leaving Women of Color to fend for themselves, just as NAWSA had done prior to winning the vote. The League was successful in organizing female voters, but American politics did not change dramatically as a result of women voting, as suffrage organizers had long claimed. Instead, most women registered in the same party as their male relatives and voted the way their male relatives voted.



[Planks in the LWV campaign, 1920](#) is in the Public Domain.

American politicians, also believing the rhetoric of suffrage organizers, worked to create legislation that they believed women voters would support, hoping to gain a new block of voters. One such piece of legislation was the Shepard-Towner Act of 1921, which provided federal funds for expectant mothers and young children's medical care. The law was passed by the men of the House and Senate, who believed supporting it would increase their popularity among female voters, but instead they found that most women did not support the government's intrusion into matters that were viewed as private matters. The American Medical Association spoke against the law as an example of government overreach, while Alice Paul and the National Women's Party criticized Shepard-Towner as discriminatory against men. The law expired in 1929.

Anti-Lynching

African American women attempted to use their newly acquired right to vote in order to further anti-lynching and other race-focused legislation. Amy Garvey, Mary Terrell, and Ida Wells continued to work within organizations such as the United Negro Improvement League and the NAACP, advocating that women of color organize and vote to end racial discrimination in the United States. In 1930, Women of Color joined with some White women in the South to form the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching and put their support behind the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, which attempted to make lynching a Federal crime. Although Dyer and other anti-lynching bills ultimately failed to pass both houses of congress during this time, women of color continued to use the power of the ballot to end race discrimination.



[Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, 1938](#) is in the Public Domain.

Equal Rights Amendment

While most White women shrank from new political activities during the 1920s, Alice Paul and the National Woman's Party continued to push for women's equality through the proposal of the Equal Rights Amendment, which states: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex." (Equal Rights Amendment, Alice Paul Institute)



[NWP advocating for Equal Rights Amendment, 1920](#) by the Associated Press is in the Public Domain.

Most women of Paul's time believed that access to suffrage and education would eventually lead to gender equality in the United States, but Paul believed that women and men should be equal before the law in all things. The intention of the Equal Rights Amendment was to enshrine in the Constitution the idea of gender equality before the law rather than leave it up for courts and society to interpret as they saw fit. The NWP presented the ERA to congress dozens of times before it was finally ratified in 1972, but it failed to pass 3/4 of the states, so it failed to become law.

Alice Paul and the NWP were radicals in that they supported full gender equality, while many women's groups supported protective laws for women. They did not support the Shepard Towner Act of 1921 because they believed it gave special treatment to women over men. Paul continued to be a staunch supporter of equal rights for women until her death in 1977.

Decline of Feminism

The decades following the ratification of the 19th amendment saw a decline in women's activism for a number of reasons. Some historians believe that the women who came of age after 1920 grew to take their right to vote for granted and simply failed to remember the struggles of their mothers and grandmothers to gain suffrage. Others, such as Estelle Freedman, believed that the 1920s witnessed a fundamental shift away from the 19th-century ideal of separate spheres to an ideology that encouraged women to assimilate into the man's world in order to gain equality. Prior to 1920, the Cult of Domesticity was still the prevalent expectation for most women, but by the middle of the 1920s, this ideal was changing, thanks in part to the vote itself. Politics had been viewed as the realm of men, but once women got the vote in 1920, women broke into the world of politics as organizers, voters, and even officeholders with the election of the first woman to congress, Jeannette Rankin, in 1918. The culture of the 1920s began to encourage competition among women, behavior that was associated with men rather than women. 1920s fashions became more masculine, emphasizing a straight silhouette and bobbed hair rather than the extreme hourglass shape and long hair that was the style for hundreds of years.



[Women in New York City, 1925](#) is in the Public Domain.

The following short video explains the major cultural changes that occurred during the Roaring 20s and how they developed into one of the most iconic images of the era, The Flapper. Like most cultural shifts, those of the 1920s were started and embraced by young people and were often criticized by their elders, so trends like the ones in the video were part of a new youth culture. The vast majority of American women did not dress as flappers, although most recognized the convenience of shorter skirts and less restricting undergarments, allowing these trends to remain long after the 1920s.



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<https://pressbooks.whccd.edu/usherstory/?p=98#oembed-1>

Conclusion

The 1920s saw a decline in political activism for White women, while Women of Color continued to work for racial justice. Politicians attempted to curry favor with female voters, but these attempts largely failed. Instead, the decade of the 1920s showed that the vote did not change women, nor did voting women change politics; at least not yet.

Question to Consider

How do women express their freedom from traditional ideas today?

PART V

NATIONAL EMERGENCIES AND SECOND WAVE FEMINISM (1929-PRESENT)

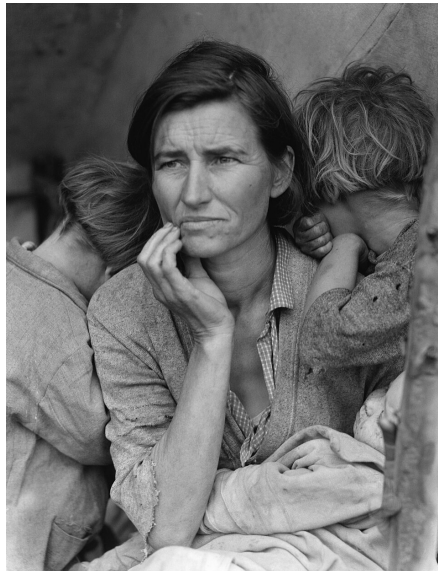
24. Women in the Great Depression

Learning Objectives

- Recognize the impact the Great Depression had on the United States as a whole and on women specifically.
- Analyze the role of women in leadership during the New Deal.

The Great Depression

On October 29, 1929, the largest stock market crash to date occurred, causing the United States economy to freefall into the worst depression in American history. The worst year of the Great Depression, 1932, saw 1 in 4 Americans unemployed, nearly 10,000 banks had failed, and the Dust Bowl had begun to take its toll on the Great Plains. As their husbands lost their jobs, farms, and livelihoods, women did what they could to support their families financially, such as taking in boarders, laundry and sewing for their neighbors, raising chickens and selling the eggs, and many other home-based jobs. Women did what they could but also had to be careful that they didn't challenge gender roles too strongly. Nevertheless, women often found themselves in the position of breadwinner while their husbands were out of work, which turned the traditional family power dynamic upside down. The trauma of the Great Depression impacted families in profound ways, causing an increase in suicide and abandonment as men lost their hope and their dignity.



"Migrant Mother" Florence Thompson with 3 of her 7 children, 1936 by Dorothea Lange is in the Public Domain.

As bad as the Depression was for the country at large, it was even worse for communities of color, including Indigenous Americans, African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans, which endured unemployment at twice the

national rate as well as a rise in racial discrimination and violence. Women of color endured all of these alongside the rest of their family as well as their own struggles as they saw their traditional jobs disappear and their families' existence threatened.

Indigenous Women

By the 1930s, most Indigenous women lived on reservations in rural parts of the United States and had endured forced assimilation programs such as boarding schools for several generations. Most lived in abject poverty, subsisting on \$100 a year compared with \$1350 for most other Americans, and they had virtually no connection to their lives before the reservations, except what the few living elders could tell them. Although poverty and cultural disconnection would continue for several generations, the Roosevelt administration created a program that would begin to shift authority back to Native peoples, the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934.

While the IRA did not specifically target help to Indigenous women, it marked a reversal of more than a century of wanton land usurpation and cultural destruction by the Federal government of the United States. Its director, Progressive reformer John Collier, closed some boarding schools, hired ethnographers to record, transcribe, and eventually teach native languages to Indigenous children in reservation day schools, and facilitated the return of some two million acres back to tribal communities. He also created the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1935, which provided funds for Indigenous artists, many of whom were women, to paint murals on public buildings and sell handicrafts such as blankets, pottery, and jewelry.

Although the IRA was considered by some to be another way to control Indigenous Americans, the ethnographers Collier employed were able to connect with native language speakers, many of whom were women, recording and preserving the language for future generations. Among the Chumash of the California coast, women like Maria Solares, Lucretia Garcia, and Mary J. Yee worked with ethnographer John Harrington to record themselves speaking their language and create a syllabary that could then be taught to future generations.

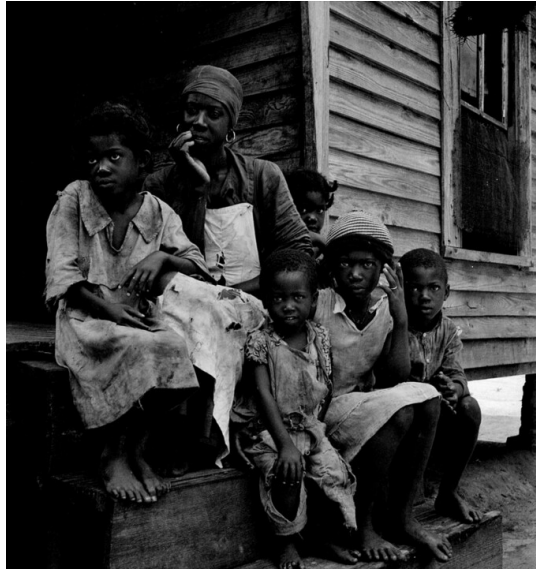


[Valentina Valencia with her mother, Mary J. Yee in 1961.](#) is in the Public Domain.

African American Women

African American women were among the first to lose their jobs at the start of the economic downturn that became the Great Depression. Throughout the United States, middle-class families cut expenses by getting rid of luxuries, such as their domestic servants, most of whom were women of color. Over 75% of domestic servants lost their jobs during the Depression, leaving many women without income for over a decade. Farm labor was also reduced, thanks to the Dust

Bowl, which forced thousands of families to move North and West for a better life. Unfortunately, there were few job opportunities where they were heading, and there was ample racism as people became more fearful of job competition.



["A Dollar a Day" working in the turpentine industry, 1936](#) by Dorothea Lange is in the Public Domain.

Mexican and Asian Americans

Out West, Mexican and Asian Americans saw their traditional jobs in agriculture given over to White families who were refugees from the hard-hit Dust Bowl regions of the Great Plains. By 1934, over half of the agricultural jobs in California were done by Whites, while just five years earlier, nearly all agricultural workers in the state had been Mexican American or Asian American. Like Black women, Mexican and Asian women in the West had been employed as domestic help before the Depression and saw their jobs disappear as White middle-class families tightened their belts during the Depression.



[Japanese Woman & Daughter near Guadalupe, CA, 1937](#) by Dorothea Lange is in the Public Domain.

Repatriation

In addition to racial discrimination in jobs, the Mexican American community faced the reality of repatriation. Repatriation was the process of removing non-citizens from the United States and returning them to their country of origin. While there were millions of non-citizens from many countries around the world, the US government targeted those of Mexican heritage for repatriation because it was relatively inexpensive to do so, since most had settled in states bordering Mexico, such as Texas and California. Indeed, while some Mexican peoples voluntarily left because there were no jobs, most were either manipulated or threatened into leaving or outright taken against their will across the border and left there. Many Mexican women with children encountered intense pressure from public assistance and charity workers to return to Mexico, telling them they had family there who would support them or that they would be more comfortable. However, in many cases their children were born in the United States and they had no connection to Mexico. As one Mexican mother told Dorothea Lange of the Farm Security Administration in 1935, “Sometimes I tell my children that I would like to go to Mexico, but they tell me ‘We don’t want to go, we belong here’” (Lange 1935).



[Mexican Mother with Baby, California 1935](#) by Dorothea Lange is in the Public Domain.

Historians estimate that as many as one million Mexican Americans repatriated during the Great Depression, many of them citizens. In Los Angeles and other border communities, police pulled people who “looked” Mexican into busses, drove them to the border, and left them there. Women who were expecting babies then gave birth in Mexico to children who should have been American citizens and in many cases, they themselves were citizens. It would take a generation or more for the community to recover from such separation.

Documenting the Depression

Two days after Franklin Delano Roosevelt was inaugurated in 1933, his wife, Eleanor hosted the first of over 300 weekly White House press conferences for female journalists only. At first, the women reported on Mrs. Roosevelt’s daily schedule, art in the White House, and even low-cost meals that women could serve their families. However, eventually the journalists were able to push the First Lady to discuss politics and government policy, the *New Deal*, that would bring Relief, Recovery, and Reform to the economy of the United States. The idea of a weekly news conference for

women was proposed by journalist and friend of the First Lady Lorena Hickok in order to save women's jobs during the Great Depression. Mrs. Roosevelt later recalled, "Unless women reporters could find something new to write about, the chances were that some of them would lose their jobs in a very short time" (Quoted in Woloch 2017).

While the First Lady's all-woman White House press conferences did indeed save women's jobs, they also provided information to women and for women about the policies of the Federal government that were impacting them during these terrible economic times. Guest speakers such as Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins and many other women working within the government shared information about the programs they were working on, programs that would help lower prices, create jobs, and provide other forms of relief for American families. Reporter Bess Furmon recalled that Mrs. Roosevelt "conducts classes on scores of subjects, always seeing beyond her immediate hearers to 'the women of the country.'" (Quoted in Woloch 2017). They even addressed controversial topics, such as whether or not married women should work given that so many men were unemployed.

The *New Deal* created hundreds of programs to help the people of the United States, from cash assistance to farm refinance, and programs like the Works Progress Administration created millions of jobs that employed men across the country. The administration needed to be informed about what the people needed so that they could create the best programs to help the most people, so it sent out hundreds of writers and photographers to document the suffering of the American people. One of the most important of those documentarians was photographer Dorothea Lange, who took thousands of photos for the Farm Security Administration throughout the 1930s. Lange followed migrants from the Dust Bowl-ravaged Great Plains on their journey to California, Oregon, and Washington, taking photos and talking with her subjects. She photographed migrant work camps and conditions in the fields and documented the experiences of some of the poorest and most marginalized Americans. Her work helped to create a documentary collection unlike any other and led to the creation of programs that specifically targeted the agricultural industry, such as permanent housing and bathrooms in migrant worker camps. Dorothea Lange went on to document the home front during World War II.



[Dorothea Lange in 1936](#) by Paul S. Taylor is in the Public Domain.

Relief

Locally run charitable groups often discriminated against people of color, making it difficult for them to get the help they desperately needed. Even after Franklin Roosevelt became president in 1933, Federal work programs continued to discriminate against Men of Color by placing them in segregated workspaces, and they discriminated against women by not hiring them at all. Twenty-six states had laws or policies that forbade women from working a government job if her husband had one. Even more profound than any law, social expectations meant that women, especially married women, should not work. Married women with children were able to receive public relief and charity while their husbands were expected to take one of the public works program jobs. Families of Color often faced discrimination in both relief and public works jobs.

Although Roosevelt's administration continued to follow the social protocols of segregation, it was ahead of its time in who it hired as presidential advisors. Mary McLeod Bethune, a longtime advocate of African American education, was appointed to the Office of Minority Affairs in the National Youth Administration in Franklin Roosevelt's cabinet. Bethune recognized the unique struggles of the Black community and advised the president on the best ways to help the community.

Progressive White women featured prominently in FDR's government in both formal and informal roles. Frances Perkins, Secretary of the Department of Labor and the first woman to hold a cabinet position, advised the president on the best ways to help the huge number of Americans who were unemployed during the Depression while at the same time keeping their dignity. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt used her position to travel widely, collecting information about the problems faced by American families and sharing them with the president, using her voice and position to advocate for the poor, children, communities of color, and women during one of the most stressful economic times in history.



[Mary McLeod Bethune and Eleanor Roosevelt, 1940](#) is in the Public Domain.

Conclusion

During the Great Depression, women across the United States faced unprecedented turmoil, from losing jobs and their homes to abject poverty and hunger. They reacted as we have seen them react in previous national emergencies by simply doing what needed to be done, caring for their families and communities, and effecting change wherever they could. Eleanor Roosevelt and other Progressive era activists used their influence to help women journalists and share information with American women, advocating for them to the president and his administration. The courage and resilience American women used to survive the Great Depression would be asked of them again during World War II.

Question for Consideration

How did the lessons of the Progressive era help women during the Great Depression?

25. Women in World War II

Learning Objectives

- Describe women's activities on the home front during WWII.
- Describe women's military service during WWII.
- Analyze the impact of women's work on WWII.

World War II began in Europe in 1939, when Germany, controlled by Adolf Hitler and the Nazis, invaded Poland. Together with its ally Italy, they swept through most of Europe and brought most of the region under their control within just three years. The Nazis set up forced labor camps, called concentration camps, to support its war machine, as well as death camps where it systematically murdered more than 10 million civilians as well as prisoners of war. While this is happening in Europe, the United States provided aid but did not become directly involved until December, 1941, when Japan, which had become allied with Germany and Italy in 1940, attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

Like World War I, the United States was not prepared for a global conflict in 1941, and it took months to recruit, train, and organize members of the military as well as mobilize its civilian population to support the war effort. Americans from all walks of life joined the military and took jobs in factories producing war materials such as munitions, airplanes, and ships. The people left behind dealt with rationing of food and fuel. Everyone was expected to sacrifice for the war, including the country's women.

Women in the Military

Approximately 350,000 American women joined the military during World War II. They worked as nurses, drove trucks, repaired airplanes, and performed clerical work.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://pressbooks.whccd.edu/usherstory/?p=107#oembed-1>

Because the military was still segregated, Women of Color who joined were placed in segregated units and often placed far behind the lines, although this did not mean that their jobs were not important. In 1945, the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion was assigned the daunting task of sorting a backlog of thousands of pieces of mail from servicemembers. White officers had assigned the task to Black women because they assumed they would not succeed, but they did. Within a few months, the Six Triple Eight had sorted through a backlog of over 17 million pieces of mail,

ensuring that soldiers received mail from back home and that their letters were delivered to their families, which had a positive impact on morale.



[6888th Battalion in Rouen, France, May 27, 1945](#) from the National Archives is in the Public Domain.

Women on the Home Front

As we have learned, women have worked outside the home for wages since the early 19th century, but most of those jobs were in the textile or garment industry or restricted to “Pink Collar” jobs such as secretaries and teachers. World War II changed the type and volume of women’s work. Five million women entered the workforce between 1940 and 1945 in order to fill in for men who left to serve overseas in factories and offices, earning less than the men they were replacing. Still others took jobs in the defense industry as the United States ramped up production of ships, airplanes, and other machinery. The Federal government and contractors like Kaiser and Boeing created ad campaigns designed to entice women to work for the government and in the defense industry. The most famous of these campaigns was Rosie the Riveter, but there was also Wendy the Welder and the Government Girls, which portrayed women as ladylike yet strong and capable. While not without controversy, women working in the defense industry helped the United States win World War II.



[WWII Campaign Poster](#) is in the Public Domain.

Women of Color also answered the call to join the defense industry and government work, often in segregated shops, Kaiser Shipyards in Richmond, California, for example, ran segregated production shops for most of the war. While White women often earned less than their White male counterparts, Women of Color earned even less than their White female counterparts. Latina women joined African American women in the defense industry, sometimes working alongside them in segregated shops but, in other situations, working alongside White women. Many Indigenous women decided to leave their reservations and take defense industry jobs in urban areas far from home. Some remained in the cities when the war ended while others returned home and began to organize and agitate for better treatment for their people.



[Eastine Cowner building Liberty Ship George Washington Carver at Kaiser Shipyard, Richmond, CA 1943](#)
is in the Public Domain

Many of the women who worked in defense industries and factories were mothers whose husbands were serving

overseas, and one of their biggest challenges was childcare. Eleanor Roosevelt encouraged her husband to create government childcare facilities under the Community Facilities Act of 1942. This program created seven childcare centers across the country and served over 100,000 children. They also encouraged defense contractors to create their own childcare facilities on their campuses so that their mothers were nearby. Kaiser Shipyards operated such facilities on their campus, along with housing that allowed women and their children to live near their jobs, although these were only available to White employees. Still, many women lacked access to childcare and left their young children in the care of neighbors or on their own at home.

Japanese Internment

While the United States loosened its restrictions on Chinese immigration during World War II, finally lifting its ban in 1943 because China was a wartime ally, it transferred its anti-Asian sentiment to Japanese Americans following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Beginning in 1942, Japanese men, women, and children were taken from their homes, gathered at rodeo and fair grounds up and down the West Coast, and then taken to internment camps in the interior, mostly desert areas. Japanese American mothers were put in the terrible position of having to explain to their children why they were being rounded up, and they had to recreate some semblance of normalcy in overcrowded horse stalls, barns, and military barracks. Japanese Americans would begin to be released from the internment camps in early 1945, and many single women left to get defense industry jobs or join the military to try to prove their loyalty to the United States.



[Shigeho Kitamoto and her four children, March 30, 1942](#) is in the Public Domain.

Conclusion

During World War II, women left their homes and traditional roles to help with the war effort. Most filled in for absent husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons on the farm; created Victory Gardens to help feed the troops; or took jobs the men in their communities had once held, usually for far less pay. Some answered the call to be *Soldiers Without Guns* by working in government offices or defense industries, and still others joined the Women's Army Auxiliary Corp (WACs), the Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service (WAVES), the Women Air Service Pilots (WASPs), the American Red Cross, or myriad other groups who went overseas to help with the war effort. Although technically not in combat, hundreds of women lost their lives in service to their country during World War II. Their service and sacrifice not

only helped the United States win World War II, but it also transformed the women themselves and many would feel empowered enough to begin a new round of feminist activities.

Question for Consideration

How do you think women's activities in World War II changed their perception of themselves?

26. Post-War America

Learning Objectives

- Explain the re-emergence of the Cult of Domesticity after World War II.
- Analyze the return to domesticity in the Post-war era.

After World War II, the United States entered a long period of relative peace and prosperity, marked by an increased birth rate, consumerism, and the growth of suburbs. The Post-War era was marked by a return to what Americans viewed to be “traditional” values in work and family life. The country had spent the better part of two decades dealing with national emergencies, first the Great Depression, then World War II, and what many wanted was a return to normal. The late 1940s through the early 1960s saw a resurrection of the Cult of Domesticity, the Baby Boom, and the rise of the suburban housewife.

The Cult of Domesticity—1950s Reboot

The Cult of Domesticity was a set of values women were expected to uphold during the Victorian era, those of piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. The early 20th century saw a rise of the New Woman, culminating in the 1920s Flapper, who was educated, independent, and free-spirited. However, after the struggles of the Great Depression and World War II, when the marriage and birth rates declined in the United States, many Americans desired a return to what they perceived as a simpler and more prosperous time when women ruled the home and men ruled the world of business.

Fashions of the late 1940s and 1950s reflected a return to the corsets and hoops of the mid-Victorian era, emphasizing the hourglass shape and forcing women’s bodies into uncomfortable underclothes in order to achieve the ideal.

The photos below show the underclothing necessary to achieve the look in the last photo:



[Corsalette by Gossard, 1953](#) is in the Public Domain.



حَلَمْتُ بِأَنِّي رَكَبْتُ سَجَادَةَ سُحْرِيَّةَ

in my maidenform bra

Shades of Scheherazade! I'm soaring over the shifting sands
 ...higher than the minaret spires
 ...and the only magic word I need is Maidenform!
 I'm shaped so beautifully...molded so divinely...
 I'm the loveliest figure in 1001 Nights of dreaming!

The dream of a bra: Maidenform's Etude® in white
 nylon tulle or broadcloth, A, B, and C cups... from 2.00;
 AA cups for teen figures, 1.75. Send for free style booklet.



[Maidenform Ad, 1955](#) is in the Public Domain.



[July, 1959 Black Taffeta Day Dress by Yves Saint Laurent for Dior](#) is in the Public Domain.

Girdles, the bullet bra, and other devices pushed women's bodies into the hourglass shape just as corsets had done during the 1860s. Women also wore full skirts, sometimes stuffed with crinolines or small hoops, and tops or jackets with wide shoulders to accentuate a tiny waistline. Women were expected to wear gloves, hats, and heeled shoes to maintain an ultra-feminine and pure look at all times.

The media did its part to instruct women about the proper way to present themselves. Just as Godey's influenced women's fashion and behavior in the 19th century, print media such as Good Housekeeping and Harper's Bazaar displayed the latest fashions and gadgets for the home and gave advice on everything from keeping a clean home to keeping your husband happy. In addition to print media, women also took their cues from Hollywood in both film and television, which was the latest medium after World War II and was in most American homes by 1960. The soap opera and the situation comedy (sitcom) quickly became common in the American psyche, with characters like June Cleaver from *Leave it to Beaver* presenting the image of the perfect housewife. Mrs. Cleaver did it all: maintained a clean home, cooked dinner, gave motherly advice to her sons, and attended PTA meetings, all while carrying herself with feminine grace. The images that bombarded women each day were supported by their school lessons, as girls were expected to take Home Economics in junior high and high school, and most women were expected to marry right after high school.



[*June and Ward Cleaver from Leave it to Beaver, 1957*](#) is in the Public Domain.

The Baby Boom

Just as motherhood was the pinnacle of womanhood during the Victorian era, post-war society placed special emphasis on marriage and family life. The birth rate dropped during the Great Depression and World War II as families struggled to keep food on the table and the country afloat during the war. The post-war boom in marriage and births, known as the Baby Boom, was a global phenomenon and had a variety of causes, but its impact on women in Western culture was unique. In 1900, the middle-class birth rate was just under two children per woman, but the 1950s saw this rate double. American culture became obsessed with weddings and babies, giving rise to such modern concepts as the wedding industry and baby showers.



[*Young Mothers changing their baby's diapers, New York, 1946*](#) is in the Public Domain.

While the Victorian ideal of motherhood stressed that women were natural-born mothers, the 1950s ideal combined this image with the idea that women should seek expert advice on parenting as well. Dr. Benjamin Spock published a book entitled *Baby and Child Care*, which became one of the best-selling books of all time and was a staple in the library of every mother during the 1950s and 1960s. He encouraged women to use their intuition and common sense

and to get to know their children as individuals. Society encouraged women to focus all of their attention on their children, which often left women feeling unfulfilled and depressed. The 1950s and 1960s saw an increase in women being treated for anxiety and depression with drugs such as Valium. Life in the suburbs, with its emphasis on perfection, only exacerbated the isolation and depression women felt.

The Suburban Housewife

The post-war economic boom was supported by a growth of suburbs, with their neat, treelined streets; fenced yards; and neighborhood schools. Women spent most of their time in these homes, cooking, cleaning, and raising their children in relative isolation from other women. This new ideal is in sharp contrast to the Victorian era, when a woman could expect to spend most of her life amongst other women, such as mothers, sisters, and daughters. The 1920s had begun the shift away from close female relationships, and by the 1950s, women were expected to have their closest relationship with their husbands, who worked all day during the week and spent the weekends working in the yard. Women spent most of their time with their young children, and once their children started school, they spent most of their time alone. Television shows like *Leave it to Beaver* portrayed a life of cleaning house and cooking dinner as the source of joy for housewives, but the reality left women feeling isolated and depressed, a condition Betty Friedan described as the “problem that had no name.”

[Advertisement for Electric Clothes Dryer, 1966](#) is in the Public Domain.

In 1952, Sociologist Mirra Komarovsky conducted a survey of newly graduated college-educated women and found that half wanted to be full-time housewives and mothers, while about 30% expected to return to the workforce after their youngest child began school, and just 20% planned to combine family life and a career. This survey indicated that even women who were highly educated believed they should stay home and raise a family, which gave rise to the idea that

women attended college to find a good husband, deemed an “Mrs.” degree, rather than to have an education and career of their own. A decade later, a 1962 Gallup poll showed that while women believed that gender equality was against nature and they were happy with their lives as housewives, they wished that their daughters would get an education and marry later than they did. These survey results suggest that perhaps housewives were not as happy as they claimed.

Conclusion

The Postwar era was marked by a return to what Americans thought of as traditional family life and values. The media of the day encouraged a recreation of the Cult of Domesticity by portraying happy women at home performing domestic duties, doing child care, and dressing in ultra-feminine clothing. Women typically married right out of high school and gave birth to double the number of children their mothers and grandmothers had had. Those who did attend college earned degrees or certificates in “Pink Collar” work or dropped out once they met their husband. While society told women they were happiest at home, many women felt trapped and hopeless, the “problem that has no name” that Betty Friedan wrote about at the launch of the Second Wave of Feminism.

Question to Consider

What can fashion trends tell us about the way society views women at any given time?

27. Second Wave Feminism

Learning Objectives

- Recognize the social changes impacting women during Second Wave Feminism.
- Recognize the various gender equality laws enacted by the Federal government.
- Evaluate the impact of the Sexual Revolution.
- Analyze the changing roles women played in society during Second Wave Feminism.

The Feminine Mystique

The Post-War period in the United States saw the return of the Cult of Domesticity as the country sought a return to what they remembered as simpler, happier times before the Great Depression. The suburban lifestyle, as depicted on television and other media, was well within reach for most White, middle and upper class families. Women attended college in order to find a husband, then were expected to quit working and raise a family in the suburbs, finding fulfillment in keeping house. However, just as the 19th century Cult of Domesticity was viewed as a trap by many women who lived it, so too did the role of suburban housewife in the mid-20th century. The woman who articulated their views was Betty Friedan.



[Betty Friedan, 1960](#) is in the Public Domain.

Betty Friedan was born in Illinois and attended Smith College as well as the University of California in Berkley. She

worked as a journalist, married and had a child while still working, which was unusual at the time. She was eventually fired when she became pregnant with her second child. Using her skills as a journalist, she surveyed and interviewed dozens of college graduates, writing about their experiences in education, family, and overall satisfaction with their lives in a series of freelance articles. She dubbed her findings “the problem that has no name.”

Friedan’s article series eventually became a book, *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963. In it, she describes the malaise felt by suburban housewives. As one Long Island housewife put it, “I seem to sleep so much. I don’t know why I should be so tired. This house isn’t nearly so hard to clean as the cold-water flat we had when I was working. The children are at school all day. It’s not the work. I just don’t feel alive.” (Quoted in Friedan 2013, 15)

The book itself was a best seller and is credited for starting the Second Wave Feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. However, Friedan’s book had its weaknesses and critics. For example, she focused her research exclusively on college educated White women, which was a very small group who were typically middle or upper class while the vast majority of women in the Post War period had never attended college. Her book was criticized for painting all housewives with the broad brush and for not taking into account the experiences of women of color, whose husbands, because of discrimination in pay and employment, typically did not earn enough money for them to afford the luxury of staying home with their children. We will visit the experiences and perspective of Women of Color in later sections.

National Organization for Women (NOW)

In 1966 a group of feminists, including Betty Friedan and Shirley Chisholm, founded the National Organization for Women (Now) in Washington, D.C. with the expressed goal of “A fully equal partnership of the sexes, as part of the worldwide revolution of human rights.” (NOW 1966) Their Statement of Purpose included a list of demands to fulfill their goal, including the government using the full force of law and the Constitution to ensure women’s equality in society as well as their rejection of “token” female appointments as a way to display equality without actually granting it to all women. While their specific demands have changed as women’s issues have expanded, their core demand of full equality of the sexes has remained constant since 1966.

Federal Protection

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy created the President’s Commission on the Status of Women. The goal of the commission was to investigate the economic, social, and political status of women in the United States and to report back recommendations for resolving issues of gender discrimination. The bi-partisan commission was chaired by former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and was the first comprehensive study of women in the country’s history. The commission determined that discrimination against women in pay and hiring practices was widespread and that it violated the 14th Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause. They recommended laws to address equality, affordable day care, paid maternity leave, and educational and vocational programs targeted to women. A direct result of the commission’s findings was the passage of the Equal Pay Act in 1963, which made it illegal for employers to pay women and men at different rates. While the Equal Pay Act did not automatically end wage discrimination, it did provide a pathway for legal recourse for women who experienced discrimination.



[Eleanor Roosevelt with President Kennedy at her appointment to the President's Commission on the Status of Women, 1962](#)
is in the Public Domain.

In 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination in public spaces based on race, color, religion, or national origin. The law was intended to end the Jim Crow era segregation that was still in place in spite of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954. The law was not popular among many in Congress, and in an attempt to prevent its passage, Howard Smith of Virginia added sex to the list of categories in Title VII of the law, which specifically addressed employment. Ironically, the law passed anyway, protecting women from employment discrimination, and led to the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC), which enforces laws that prohibit discrimination in the workplace.

The federal government passed numerous laws and created dozens of programs and organizations intended to end discrimination against historically marginalized groups throughout the 1960s and 1970s. For example, Affirmative Action programs, which encouraged the hiring and college acceptance for racial minorities, were extended to include women in 1970. In the coming years, tax deductions for child care and employment benefits for women in government jobs were added based on the recommendation of JFK's Commission on the Status of Women. These programs led to an increased number of women attending and graduating from college as well as more women working for wages outside the home.

One of the most important anti-discrimination laws passed was the Equal Credit Opportunity Act in 1974. Originally intended for women, it eventually added protection for people of color as well. The ECOA made it illegal for financial institutions to discriminate in lending based on gender or marital status. The ECOA led the way for women, both married and single, to be able to have a bank account in their own name and begin to build financial independence.

Sexual Revolution and Body Autonomy

By the time of Second Wave Feminism, the Baby Boom was beginning to wind down, the Counter Culture, Civil Rights, and Anti-War movements were heating up, and young people around the United States were becoming more free in their sexual expressions. This trend had begun during the 1920s and never really slowed, but it increased dramatically during the 1960s as ideas of “free love” and “sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll” became the mantra of youth culture. The media, including movies, television, and advertising, became more lenient in showing sexual images, even those featuring unwed couples. In 1953, Hugh Hefner founded *Playboy* magazine, and in 1960, the first *Playboy* club opened in Chicago. The *Playboy* brand became representative of the Sexual Revolution, portraying women as sex objects but also

representing the idea that women were as interested in sex as men. The Playboy Bunny came to symbolize these two ideas simultaneously. Of course, the biggest issue for women who wished to engage in sex, regardless of marital status, was preventing pregnancy.



[Playboy Bunnies, 1971](#) is in the Public Domain.

In 1960, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved the public use of the first oral contraceptive, commonly referred to as “The Pill.” Prior to 1960, women and men used barrier methods such as diaphragms and condoms, but these were often difficult to access because of the law or carried a social stigma, particularly among married couples. The pill changed this dynamic completely. According to the American Medical Association, 1.2 million women were using the pill in the United States within two years of it becoming available, and more than 300 million women worldwide have used the pill since 1960.

Griswold v. Connecticut 1965

While women generally embraced the pill, many found that they were unable to access it because of the Federal Comstock Laws or similar state laws that prohibited information about contraception from being delivered by mail or sometimes even given out by doctors. To challenge these laws, a gynecologist at Yale School of Medicine and the head of Planned Parenthood, Estelle Griswold, filed a lawsuit against the state of Connecticut, arguing it’s 1879 ban on the use of contraception violated the equal protection clause of the 14th amendment. While initially the suit failed in lower courts, in 1965 the Supreme Court ruled that birth control was protected by the implied right to privacy throughout the Bill of Rights. This decision allowed married women throughout the United States to access contraception, including the pill, transforming women’s health and lives forever.

Roe v. Wade 1973

Several years after the Griswold decision, the Supreme Court heard the case of “Jane Roe” (not her real name), who sued the Dallas County District Attorney over a Texas law that banned abortion except in cases where it was ordered by a doctor to save the woman’s life. “Roe” argued that, like in the Griswold case, abortion was covered on the implied right to privacy present in several sections of the Bill of Rights. In 1973, the court agreed that within the first trimester of pregnancy, the decision to terminate a pregnancy could only be made by the woman and her doctor. However, the court allowed that states could regulate abortions during the second and third trimesters under reasonable circumstances but that allowances always had to be made for the health or life of the mother.

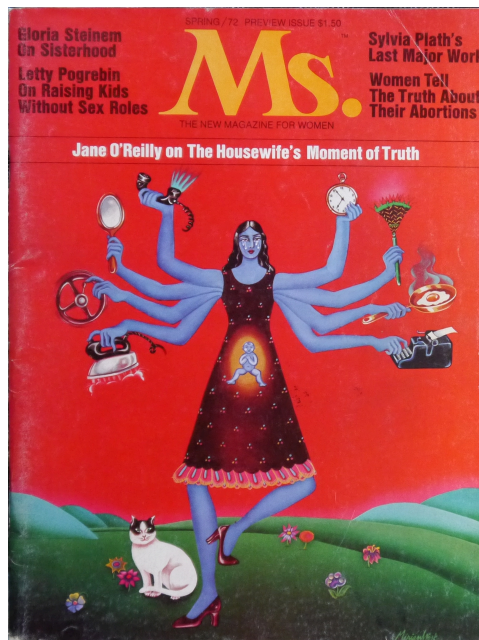
The Griswold and Roe decisions were landmark cases that transformed the lives of women living in the United States. Prior to these decisions, women had very little control over when and how often they became mothers, particularly within the marriage relationship, and many women experienced health issues as a result of multiple pregnancies, miscarriages, and stillbirths. After these decisions, women were able to control the number of children they had or even if they wanted to become a mother at all. In short, women’s body autonomy was finally protected by law.

Conscious-Raising

As Second Wave Feminism grew as a social, political, and economic movement, women began meeting together in informal groups to discuss their shared experiences as women. These groups became known as Consciousness-Raising (CR) groups, and they provided many women with a space to express their anger and frustration with gender bias in the workplace, their lack of economic power, stifling marriage and family dynamics, domestic violence, and sexual assault. At a time when women felt isolated and alone because of the suburban ideal, CR groups enabled women to connect with other women and become empowered by the knowledge that they were not alone in their experiences with the patriarchy. Women who had been told that a truly feminine woman never showed negative emotion were allowed to scream and cry without judgment. “Anger is an important, necessary, and productive aspect of a CR group.” (Blakemore 2021) As with Friedan’s book, women of color were either overtly excluded or felt marginalized at these meetings because they tended to focus only on the experiences of White women and did not address the issues of race and class that were experienced by women of color.

Ms. Magazine

Inspired by consciousness-raising groups and with the desire to inform the country about women’s issues, eight women, most notably Gloria Steinem, began publishing Ms. Magazine in 1971. The magazine still exists today and continues its original goal of covering women’s and feminists’ issues in the United States and around the world. The term Ms. represents men’s and women’s equality in title at a time when a woman’s marital status dictated how they would be addressed (Mrs. for married, Miss for single) while men were and are addressed simply as Mr. regardless of their marital status. Below is the cover of the Spring 1972 issue, portraying the modern woman as the Hindu goddess Vishnu to represent the sacred, universal feminine but with her 8 arms full of all of the tasks women were expected to perform.



[Spring, 1972 cover of Ms. Magazine](#) is in the Public Domain.

Conclusion

Second Wave Feminism achieved a great deal towards women's equality with men. Laws such as the Equal Pay Act and Supreme Court Cases such as *Griswold v. Connecticut* and *Roe V. Wade* supported the idea that women and men should be equal under the law. The 1960s and 1970s saw more women than ever entering the workforce and institutions of higher education. Thanks to access to birth control, women began having fewer children or waiting until they were finished with college to start a family. As the laws changed to support women's equality, so too did women change and begin to expect equal treatment. Some women began insisting on being addressed as Ms., hyphenating their name after marriage, or even keeping their maiden name. However, not all women benefitted from these new laws or feminist consciousness. Women of Color, in spite of the success of both the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement, continued to deal with limited access to high-paying jobs, higher education, and health care that included contraception and abortion, as well as hypersexualization and disrespect in the media and society at large. Women of Color were not silent, however, and began to use their voices in academia and the media to fight against the White patriarchy and colonialism within the United States.

Question to Consider

Which issue facing women today do you think needs to be addressed and how?

28. Indigenous Feminism

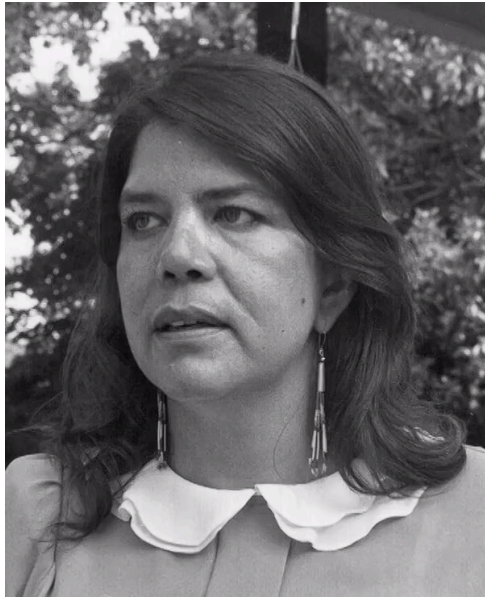
Learning Objectives

- Recognize the missing issues and goals of the First and Second Waves of Feminism.
- Analyze the concerns and goals of Indigenous feminists.

Indigenous Feminism

While the mainstream feminism of the First and Second Waves focused on gaining legal rights for women and challenging the patriarchy, these issues have never really spoken to Native/Indigenous women. During the First Wave, Native women were focused on surviving the attacks perpetrated by the United States Army and Federal government during the so-called “Indian Wars,” which ultimately plundered Native American tribal land and autonomy by creating the reservation system. Once confined to reservations, the Federal government worked alongside churches and philanthropic organizations to strip Native people of their culture and heritage by stealing their children and forcing them into boarding schools. Indigenous women fought to preserve their language and lifeways by working with ethnographers and anthropologists who saw Native culture as a dying culture that needed to be preserved for future study, not to keep it from dying to begin with. Academics such as Alfred Kroeber and John Harrington recorded native languages and wrote about their lifeways with the help of Native peoples, particularly women such as Mary Yee of the Chumash. These and other academics applied a Eurocentric approach to studying Native peoples, which impacted the interpretation of their research.

During the Second Wave, Indigenous women worked within the American Indian Movement (AIM) of the 1960s and 70s on issues such as land rights, cultural survival, and forced sterilization. The first female principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, Wilma Mankiller, worked to expand self-determination for indigenous communities as well as deconstructing the often-paternal stereotypes of Native peoples. She was critical of the press when they asked her to wear “tribal” clothing or when advertisements used Native peoples as tropes but she noted that female leaders were also rare within Native communities.



[Wilma Mankiller, Principal Chief of Cherokee Nation, 1985-1995](#) by Valerie Red-Horse is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported](#)

Since the Second Wave, Indigenous feminists have emphasized that colonizing systems such as Christianity and Capitalism are the true oppressors of native women rather than patriarchy. They point out that theft of their cultural practices, language, religion, and social status within their respective tribes were all the result of European colonization. Native women have worked for decades to reclaim cultural practices such as their Rites of Passage, which were integral to their womanhood prior to Europeans. Cutcha Risling Baldy, in her book *We are Dancing for You*, discussed the renewal of women's coming of age ceremonies among her tribal community, the Hoopa Valley, and other California Native communities over the last twenty years. Starting with the Gold Rush, most California tribal communities either hid or stopped these ceremonies because White miners regularly preyed upon Native girls and women, raping them and selling them into sex slavery. Reclaiming these ceremonies has empowered girls and women within Northern California tribal communities and has also provided men within these communities with a non-Western view of women that better aligns with traditional Indigenous culture.

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW)

Indigenous communities are facing an epidemic of kidnappings and murders of Native women and girls throughout the United States and Canada. In fact, the rate of murder among Native women is ten times higher than that of women in other groups. Indigenous Feminists note the lack of attention from law enforcement and the media when Native women and girls are reported missing. While the remoteness of some Tribal communities is a cause, the sexism, racism, and classism of law enforcement and the media are to blame for the lack of investigation, research, and attention to this issue.

Please watch the following video about the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and the women who are trying to solve it.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
<https://pressbooks.whccd.edu/usherstory/?p=115#oembed-1>

Conclusion

Indigenous feminists believe colonization rather than patriarchy is the real source of the oppression of Native women. Native communities have experienced theft of their lands, autonomy, and cultural heritage since Europeans first colonized the Americas in the 16th century. Native women have been at the forefront of preserving their culture and heritage, and are continuing to organize and fight against the systems of oppression brought by colonization.

Question to Consider

Why do you think Indigenous women and girls are disappearing at such a high rate?

29. Black/African American Feminism

Learning Objectives

- Recognize the issues missing from First and Second Wave Feminism.
- Analyze the concerns and goals of Black Feminists since the 1960s.

“Ain’t I A Woman?”

Black women have been discussing the intersectionality of sexism, racism, and classism in the United States for more than two centuries. Sojourner Truth, Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Amy Jacques Garvey all criticized the marginalizing of women of color by White women during the suffrage movement. They pointed out that while White women did get the right to vote in 1920, Jim Crow kept Black women from voting in most elections until the 1965 Voting Rights Act. During the Second Wave Feminism of the 1960s and 70s, Black women writers and activists continued to confront White feminists about the racism and oppression found in their movement.

In addition to being marginalized by the Feminist movement, Black women were also marginalized within the Civil Rights Movement by Black men who encouraged women to play subordinate roles within the movement. Some even accused Black women of trying to act like White women or sabotage the movement by bringing up the rampant sexism within the movement. Women working within Civil Rights organizations performed a great deal of work with very little recognition until recently. The Black Church was the bedrock of activism, particularly in the South, and women were at the heart of organization and service within their local churches. They used their social networks to organize people to attend marches, sign petitions, and donate money and food for demonstrators. Many hosted leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and those who traveled with him in their homes, often because there were no hotels for African Americans in the Jim Crow South. In the West and urban areas, women joined the Black Panthers and organized food pantries, school breakfast programs, clothing donations, and community daycare centers. Many of these women were mothers, and they attended rallies, demonstrations, speeches and engaged in community organization with their children in tow.



[Women of Black Panther Party, c 1970](#) is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International](#)

Naming Intersectionality

In 1969, Frances Beal wrote *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female*, in which she articulated how systems of racism and sexism reinforce each other, negatively impacting Black women. A decade later, a group of Black lesbian feminists called the Combahee River Collective stated that “the major systems of oppression are interlocking,” (1977) articulating the concept of intersectionality. The Collective called for a feminist movement that was anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and queer-inclusive. In 1982, bell hooks wrote *Ain’t I a Woman*, in which she invoked Sojourner Truth’s 19th-century speech and she also called out Black men for perpetuating the White male patriarchy.

Finally, in 1989, Kimberle Crenshaw wrote a paper called *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. In it, she used the term “intersectionality” to describe the complaints and concerns of Black Feminists since the 19th century. She discusses the idea, also explored by bell hooks, that when people say “women,” they really mean White women, and when they say “African American” or “Black,” they really mean Black men. The obvious problem faced by Black women is that they are marginalized by both groups, essentially rendered invisible in both the recounting of history and their unique experiences as both Black and Female. Crenshaw and hooks have changed the entire conversation regarding feminism and race in the modern United States.

Conclusion

Since the mid-19th century, Black and African American women have played an integral role in the movements for equality for both women and African Americans, yet they have been marginalized by both groups and by society at large. When they pointed out the sexism within the Civil Rights movement, they were accused of trying to split the movement. When they pointed out the racism within First and Second Wave Feminism, they were ignored or told to wait their turn. Finally, through the work of women like Frances Beale, bell hooks, and Kimberle Crenshaw, the intersectional experiences of Black women are beginning to be addressed.

Question to Consider

How do race and gender intersect when discussing discrimination of Women of Color? Do you see any other intersecting issues?

30. Chicana and Latina Feminism

Learning Objectives

- Recognize the missing issues and goals of the First and Second Waves of Feminism.
- Analyze the concerns and goals of Chicana and Latina Feminisms.

Xicanisma

Like Black and Indigenous feminists, Chicana feminists are concerned about the racism within White feminism and the sexism within the Civil Rights Movement. Because most Chicana feminists are descended from people who immigrated to the United States in the last century, they are also focused on immigration policies and cultural preservation. Concerns about racism, sexism, colonialism, and poverty form the basis of intersectionality for Chicana feminists. Writers such as Gloria Anzaldua and Cherrie Moraga have also addressed sexuality and queer visibility within the Chicano community, adding to intersecting issues that impact Women of Color and Chicanas specifically.

Labor Organizers

Chicanas have been a part of the fabric of the United States since the Southwest was acquired by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. However, it was not until the 20th century that the Mexican American population grew significantly and spread throughout the country. Chicanas and Latinas were active in labor union movements in the 1910s and 1920s in the Southwest as well as Chicago and New York City, demanding higher pay and better working conditions in mines, sweatshops, and other dangerous industries where they worked. In the 1930s, Texas labor leader Emma Tenayuca was jailed for organizing strikes against the pecan industry. While her efforts were ultimately unsuccessful, pecan producers replaced workers with machines; Tenayuca's activities show that Chicanas were visibly active in the labor movement.



[Emma Tenayuca leading Pecan Shellers' Union strike, 1938](#) is in the Public Domain.

Perhaps the most famous female labor union organizer is Dolores Huerta, who was a leader and negotiator for the United Farm Workers beginning in the 1960s. Huerta led strikes and attended negotiation meetings, often with her young children in tow, partly out of convenience but partly because she realized that seeing her children humanized her in the eyes of management. The UFW won higher pay, humane working conditions, health care access, and an end to pesticide spraying with workers in the fields largely because of Dolores Huerta.



[Dolores Huerta Holding Huelga Sign, 1965](#) is in the Public Domain.

Health Care

Medical abuse has long been a problem among Women of Color in the United States, and all feminists of color have worked to bring attention to this issue. In the 1960s and 70s, hospitals in the Los Angeles area often sterilized Latinas without their consent or even knowledge by requiring them to sign waivers in order to receive pain medication during labor: “Under the severe pain of labor, and after being assured that the operation could be easily reversed, she signed these forms and was sterilized.” (Madrigal 1978) A group of Latinas sued and won in the case of *Madrigal v. Quilligan* in 1978. Although they won their case, Latinas continue to experience abuse or neglect at the hands of health care providers, who often believe that Latinas do not feel pain as much as their White counterparts and don’t take their health concerns seriously.

Immigration Advocacy

In 1965, the Federal government passed a new immigration law that lifted limitations on people entering the United States from non-European nations. The result of the Immigration Act of 1965 was a steady increase in immigrants of color, including those from Mexico and Latin America, over the next fifty years. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 focused on reunifying families of mixed immigration statuses, such as undocumented parents of citizen children. Chicana activists and feminists were at the forefront of supporting the passage of these laws in order to keep families together and create a more humane immigration policy in the United States. Chicanas and Latinas continue to be vocal critics of inhumane border policies, such as the “Zero Tolerance” policy in 2018 that resulted in the detention

of children separate from their parents and the detention and deportation of non-criminal undocumented immigrants by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in 2025.

Chicana Feminist Writers

Since the 1980s, Chicanas have become a force in literature, publishing both fiction and non-fiction works that explore what it means to be Chicana. In 1981, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga wrote *A Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, which was one of the first books of its kind to discuss Chicano culture within the framework of feminist theory. Since *A Bridge*, Anzaldúa, Moraga, and other Chicana feminists have written and published dozens of articles, short stories, poems, and books, some sharing their personal stories of growing up Latina, being gay in Latino culture, and Indigenous spirituality. These writers have given voice to a group of women who had been forgotten by both White feminists and the Chicano movement.

Conclusion

Chicana and Latina feminists have criticized both White feminists and the patriarchy present within the Civil Rights Movement, much as Black and Indigenous feminists have. They have a long history of activism within the labor movement in the United States as well as political advocacy for health care and immigration reform. Chicana feminist scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga continue to advocate for more recognition of the hard work Chicanas and Latinas have provided to the United States and the intersectionality of their lived experiences.

Question to Consider

What issues do you think impact Chicanas today?

31. Asian American Feminism

Learning Objectives

- Recognize the missing issues and goals of the First and Second Waves of Feminism.
- Analyze the concerns and goals of Asian American feminists.

Asian American Feminism

The Asian American community is extremely diverse, encompassing people from China, Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Philippines (sometimes included with Pacific Islanders). The Immigration Act of 1965 lifted racial bans on immigration and allowed many immigrants from Asia to enter the United States. Due to wars in Korea and Southeast Asia, many immigrants entered the United States as refugees fleeing oppressive regimes or displacement due to war. The diversity within the Asian American community means they are a very heterogeneous group in terms of language, culture, religion, family structure, and educational background.

Asian Americans are often stereotyped as the “model minority” due to the perception that they are high achievers and good at math and science as well as technology. However, this is inaccurate and paints an incomplete picture. Over half of Asian Americans are first-generation immigrants, and many adults have a Bachelor’s degree. Because health care work is respected in countries like the Philippines and India, a disproportionate number of immigrants from these countries were involved in these occupations in their home country and entered these same occupations when they immigrated. Other Asian American women, such as Vietnamese, dominate the nail technician industry, accounting for 80% of nail techs in California and nearly half nationwide (Garcia-Navarro 2019).

Asian American women have held a variety of positions within local and national government. In 1965, Patsy Mink became the first Asian American woman to serve in the House of Representatives. She co-authored Title IX of the Higher Education Act, which prohibited sex discrimination in any publicly funded educational institution. Mink paved the way for other women in politics as well as sports and other educational opportunities, thanks to Title IX. Upon the passage of this landmark law she said, “I hope that today’s generation of young girls will grow up to be the next generation of young women who fight as hard as young women have over the past 50 years.” (Quoted in Rios 2022).



[Patsy Mink, c. 1965](#) is in the Public Domain.

Asian American Feminists focus on the concept of the intersectionality of sexism, racism, and classism but also biculturalism and decolonization. During the Second Wave, Asian American feminists held their own meetings to create connections and address issues unique to their own community, much like other feminists of color were doing. The Asian American Feminist Collective, which is an organization of feminist writers of Asian descent, emphasizes that their power lies in bringing activists together across all Asian communities. The collective was inspired by Black feminist organizations such as the Combahee River Collective and came together during the Woman's March in 2017.

Southwest Asian/MENA Women

Since the Immigration Act of 1965, people from the region Westerners refer to as the Middle East have entered the United States in larger numbers. The term “Middle East” is a colonial term used by Great Britain and other colonizing countries; however, the region is Southwest Asia, and scholars working to decolonize language have begun referring to this region as Southwest Asia rather than the Middle East, although the overwhelming majority of people still use the colonial name. Further, this region is historically and culturally linked to North Africa because of the Greco-Roman and Islamic Empires of the ancient and Medieval eras. Thus, many members of this group use the term Middle Eastern and North African, or MENA, and wish for this identifier to be used in U.S. census data. Currently, most MENA or Southwest Asians are classified as White or Caucasian in the United States even though they are a distinct ethnic group from other whites, which makes data collection about this group of people even more complicated.

The people of Southwest Asia are as diverse as other Asian communities. The region is the historic home to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; therefore, most people in the region belong to one of these three faiths, although there is diversity within those as well. They also speak myriad languages, most prominently Arabic, Farsi, and Turkish, although there are many other languages spoken in the region by ethnic minorities. When Southwest Asians immigrate to the United States, they tend to form their own communities, mirroring what European immigrants did during the Gilded Age, which provides a sense of safety and cultural continuity. While there were Southwest Asians in the country prior to 1965, the vast majority have arrived since then, meaning they also arrived after the Civil Rights Movement.

Southwest Asian American women are often stereotyped as oppressed, forced to wear *hijab*, a veil covering their heads, and completely controlled by men. In fact, wearing a hijab is voluntary in Islam, and, of course, not all Southwest Asian

American women are Muslim, and many choose not to wear it here in the United States. The *hijab* has become a political symbol of the prejudice and discrimination faced by the MENA community in the United States and MENA women in particular.



[Protesters against Muslim ban in 2017](#) by [Liz Lemon](#) is licensed under [Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication](#)

Conclusion

The Asian American community in the United States is a widely diverse community encompassing people from China, Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia, India, Southwest Asia, and the Philippines. Women within this community have been active in First- and Second-wave feminism, the Civil Rights Movement, business, and politics, increasing in number since 1965. Asian American feminists currently organize around intersectionality as well as decolonizing the narrative around the Asian community and bringing awareness to the unique bicultural experience of the Asian American community due to recent immigration trends.

Question to Consider

What does the quote by Patsy Mink mean to you?

32. Women in Politics

Learning Objectives

- Describe the major milestones of women firsts in politics.
- Analyze the impact of women in politics.

Feminists since the American Revolution have argued that women should have a voice in their government. Abigail Adams told her husband to remember women when creating the laws of the new country and First Wave Feminism focused on women's right to vote, which finally occurred in 1920. However, women's place in society, the economy, and politics didn't change much just because women could vote. Second Wave Feminism focused more on laws that would facilitate equality, such as the Equal Pay Act and the right to body autonomy. By the end of the 1970s, women were finally beginning to have a place in the American political system.

Women Firsts in Politics

The first woman to be elected to the House of Representatives was Jeannette Rankin from Montana, which had just recently voted to allow women the right to vote in their state. She was an avowed pacifist and voted against United States' entry into both World War I and World War II. Rankin was also a lifelong advocate of women's rights and was very active in the suffrage movement in both the National American Woman's Suffrage Association and the National Woman's Party, and she spoke in congress on behalf of the suffrage prisoners being held at Occoquan.



[Jeannette Rankin's first speech in Washington, DC, April 2, 1917](#) is in the Public Domain.

In 1922, Rebecca Latimer Felton became the first woman to serve in the United States Senate, although only for a single day as a symbolic gesture for her late husband. In similar fashion, Hattie Caraway of Arkansas was elected to complete her late husband's Senate term in 1932, but she was reelected two more times, becoming the first woman to serve a full term in the Senate and the first woman to preside over the Senate.



[Hattie Caraway, Arkansas Senator, 1940](#) is in the Public Domain.

In 1981, Sandra Day O'Connor became the first woman to serve on the Supreme Court. Her nomination hearing before the Senate was contentious at times and she faced backlash from the conservative media and religious leaders of the day. O'Connor said she felt a responsibility to women as a woman first, "I felt a special responsibility ... as the first

woman. I could either do an adequate job so it would be possible for other women to be appointed without [people] saying, ‘Oh, see, a woman can’t do it,’ so it became very important that I perform in a way that wouldn’t provide some reason or cause not to have more women in the future. That was very important to me.” (Quoted in Out of Order 2013).



[Sandra Day O'Connor swearing in, 1981](#) is in the Public Domain.

In 2020, Kamala Harris became the first woman elected as Vice President of the United States. She had been Attorney General and a senator from California before becoming Joe Biden’s running mate for the presidency. As Vice President, Harris led an evenly split senate and made more tie-breaking votes than any other V.P. in history. She ran for president in 2024 but lost the election to Donald Trump. In 2019 she published a memoir in which she reflected, “My daily challenge to myself is to be part of the solution, to be a joyful warrior in the battle to come. My challenge to you is to join that effort. To stand up for our ideals and our values. Let’s not throw up our hands when it’s time to roll up our sleeves. Not now. Not tomorrow. Not ever.” (Harris 2019, 248)



[Vice-President Kamala Harris, 2021](#) is in the Public Domain

1992: The Year of the Woman

Before the 1992, there were two women serving in the United States Senate. After the November election, there would be a record number of seven women serving in the senate. The large increase in women senators caused the media to dub 1992 the “Year of the Woman,” although the senators themselves were annoyed at the term. The photo below shows five of the seven female senators in 1993. While the addition of these seven women did not dramatically change politics, as many of their critics feared, their presence showed that women could serve in the senate and led to more women senators a generation later.



[Patty Murray \(D-WA\), Barbara Mikulski \(D-MD\), Barbara Boxer \(D-CA\) Seated, left to right: Carol Moseley Braun \(D-IL\), Dianne Feinstein \(D-CA\); not pictured: Kay Bailey Hutchison \(D-TX\), Nancy Landon Kassebaum \(R-KS\)](#)
is in the Public Domain.

2018: The Year of the Woman 2.0

In the 2018 midterm elections, a record number of women were elected to the House of Representatives, over 90, which brought the total number of women in the House to 106 and 21 women in the Senate when all were sworn in in January, 2019. Below is a short video discussing this historic moment.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
<https://pressbooks.whccd.edu/usherstory/?p=926#oembed-1>

With more women serving in political office at the local, state, and national levels than ever before in history, it is easy to say that women have achieved equality with men, that there is nothing left for Feminists to do. However, nothing could be further from the truth.

Rights Gained Become Rights Lost

In 2022, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, which forbid states from limiting a woman’s access to abortion

within the first trimester and was based on the implied right to privacy in the Bill of Rights. In *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, the Court determined that since the Constitution didn't mention abortion, it was not a protected right. Since this decision, twenty-five states or territories have passed either outright bans or severely limited access to abortion, while twenty-six have passed legislation to either protect or expand abortion, some even enshrining the right into their states' constitution. There have also been attempts to prosecute health care workers for performing abortions and women who have abortions or even miscarriages.

While no laws have been passed to limit birth control access, some states have attempted to limit access to contraception and abortive medications by mail, similar to the Comstock Laws of the 19th century. In fact, supporters of these limitations have referenced the Comstock Laws as a legal way to limit access to reproductive health information and medications to induce abortion. Those who support such measures refer to themselves as "Pro-Life" while those who want women to be able to access reproductive information freely refer to themselves as "Pro-Choice."

Since 1920, women in the United States have had the legal right to vote, and in the last thirty years, many states have expanded access to voting through mail-in ballots, ballot drop boxes, and extended days for elections. Expanded access has allowed more people, particularly marginalized people, people of color, and the poor, to vote in elections. However, a new bill referred to as the Safeguard American Voter Eligibility Act (SAVE) intends to reverse the trend by requiring strict identification in order to register and vote. These new identification requirements, if passed, would not only make it harder for marginalized communities to vote, it may also impact women, particularly those who choose to change their names when they marry. While this bill is not yet law, its passage could reverse decades of political gains by women in the United States.

Conclusion

Although women have been voting nationwide since 1920, they have only recently become a force in national politics. Women firsts, such as Sandra Day O'Connor and Kamala Harris, are inspiring. However, the *Dobbs* decision is a reminder that rights can be taken away if we are not vigilant in protecting them.

Question to Consider

What rights are you afraid to lose?

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