

Roles of North Carolinian Women during the Revolutionary Era

From the beginning of humanity itself, women have been known to be the caretakers of the household. Through almost every culture, women are raised to be mothers and wives whose only purpose is to care for their husband or children. In fact, at the beginning of the 20th century itself, women legally belonged to their husbands because of the patriarchal institution that was set in place from the very creation of America. However, as the years go by, women are becoming more and more independent, learning that they have their own potential and do not just belong in the house. In fact, during the Revolutionary War, women in North Carolina played multiple key roles in maintaining the household and taking over the money-making area of the family.

Backtracking to before the war, the French and Indian War was taking place. According to Governor Robert Dinwiddie, a British colonial administrator who became governor of Virginia, “As our Enemies, the Fr., are now in Arms to dispossess You of Y'r huntington Grounds on the River Ohio, and threaten Vengeance ag'st You and all the Fr'dly Ind's of the English, I am now raising Forces.” (Dinwiddie) This shows that, contrary to the name of the war, the French and Indian war was mainly between that of Britain and France to take over American grounds. Keep in mind that during these times, women were primarily involved in taking care of the children, cooking for their families, and making sure their household was comfortable and clean for any visitors.

According to the Lloyd Sealy Library, “The end result of the war was the expansion of the British Empire especially in North America, where almost all French territory (everything from the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi river) was ceded to British control.”

(American History) At the beginning of British control, the American colonists were at peace and did not mind the change in rulership. Everything was going fine until the British realized that they still had to pay off war debts from the recent French and Indian War. So, as a result, the British started to place taxes on the American colonies they were controlling so that it would help their financial situation. This marked the turning point of a woman’s traditional role in society.

The British placed taxes on many common goods from printed materials, with the Stamp Act, to tea, with the Tea Act. The King and the Parliament believed they had the right to put these taxes on the Colonies because they gained control over their land. The colonists, however, were enraged by these sudden acts. They started to protest against the unjust acts which led to more violence between the British and American forces. With this came the beginning of the Revolutionary War, a war fought to regain independence from the British.

As the war became more vast and dangerous, the army started to draft more and more men to fight against the impending British forces. With the men, the ones who were in charge of providing the financial support for the family, being gone to fight, it was becoming difficult for women to sustain themselves and their children. Moreover, because of the war, inflation peaked

at around 30%. This is because in exchange for covering the costs of the war, including weapons and supplies, Congress decided to print more paper money. With more printing of money, the less value the money had. Even further, there were shortages in food and resources for the colonists. Since men had been in charge of farming and providing food for the community, there was a scarcity in crops. This is when the role of colonial women during the war became important. As the men fought for freedom, women at home took over the manual labor. For instance, many women began to take an interest in farming operations and cultivating land.

In addition, they helped to heal wounded soldiers and boycott against common English goods to avoid further funding the English. In fact, according to the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, “On October 25, 1774, women in Edenton resolved to stop buying English tea and cloth to protest taxation without representation.” (Women of Edenton) In other words, 51 women in North Carolina agreed to not participate in drinking English tea to demonstrate their patriotism along with displeasure of the actions of the British. Unfortunately, on January 16, 1775, a London newspaper called Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser mocked the women’s engagement in politics. Around two months later, according to the Library of Congress, political cartoons were made portraying the women with masculine, non appealing features, and drinking from punch bowls which are usually used by men at social gatherings (A Society of Patriotic Ladies). This ripple of actions showed how many people disapproved of the

rapidly changing roles of women. Nevertheless, this increasing range of jobs women had brought about a change in the way women saw themselves in society.

This wave of feminism and change throughout the states resulted in women's education becoming more common. In fact, according to Terrell A. Crow, about 300 academies were founded in North Carolina to accommodate female students (Crow). Although mainly white women from wealthy families were given education, this spur of change was an entryway for many more women of different backgrounds to be given the same opportunities. Not only did these educational advancements allow women to be properly taught, it also enhanced female empowerment even more by giving educated women opportunities in jobs requiring knowledge on subjects regarding math, history, and literature.

As women became more engaged in politics, multiple organizations dedicated to empowering women were brought about. According to Anastatia Sims in her book titled *The Power of Femininity in the New South: Women's Organizations and Politics*, after the Revolutionary War ended, "All of the major women's patriotic societies-the Colonial Dames, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Daughters of the American Revolution... -established chapters in North Carolina." (Sims) These organizations eventually led to the opening of eyes to how powerful women are and how they deserve to be included in roles that were typically given to men.

However, not every woman had the privilege of education and a stable financial status. Many were slaves or indentured servants and lived most of their life under control of a male master. Many women were abused, sexually assaulted, and harassed during their servitude. In fact, women who gave birth during their servitude had years added onto their service time. Fortunately, some female indentured servants were given grants of land after their contracts ended. After being liberated, they used these grants of land to farm crops for a living.

In conclusion, the role given to colonial women in North Carolina during the Revolutionary Era was an important one. With their participation in the ongoing war, politics, and control over their husbands' jobs, changed the way society viewed careers that women were intended to have. Ultimately, their involvement in the war was a gateway for an everlasting equality amongst men and women in not only jobs but respect and appreciation as well.

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