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# Women Of The Republic: Intellect And Ideology In Revolutionary America (Published For The Omohundro Institute Of Early American History And Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia)





## Synopsis

Women of the Republic views the American Revolution through women's eyes. Previous histories have rarely recognized that the battle for independence was also a woman's war. The "women of the army" toiled in army hospitals, kitchens, and laundries. Civilian women were spies, fund raisers, innkeepers, suppliers of food and clothing. Recruiters, whether patriot or tory, found men more willing to join the army when their wives and daughters could be counted on to keep the farms in operation and to resist encroachment from squatters. "I have Done as much to Carry on the war as many that Settle Now at the helm of government," wrote one impoverished woman, and she was right. *Women of the Republic* is the result of a seven-year search for women's diaries, letters, and legal records. Achieving a remarkable comprehensiveness, it describes women's participation in the war, evaluates changes in their education in the late eighteenth century, describes the novels and histories women read and wrote, and analyzes their status in law and society. The rhetoric of the Revolution, full of insistence on rights and freedom in opposition to dictatorial masters, posed questions about the position of women in marriage as well as in the polity, but few of the implications of this rhetoric were recognized. How much liberty and equality for women? How much pursuit of happiness? How much justice? When American political theory failed to define a program for the participation of women in the public arena, women themselves had to develop an ideology of female patriotism. They promoted the notion that women could guarantee the continuing health of the republic by nurturing public-spirited sons and husbands. This limited ideology of "Republican Motherhood" is a measure of the political and social conservatism of the Revolution. The subsequent history of women in America is the story of women's efforts to accomplish for themselves what the Revolution did not.

## Book Information

Series: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia

Paperback: 318 pages

Publisher: The University of North Carolina Press (February 26, 1997)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0807846325

ISBN-13: 978-0807846322

Product Dimensions: 5.9 x 0.7 x 8.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (5 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #77,945 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #128 in [Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Gender Studies](#) #146 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Women's Studies > Feminist Theory](#) #180 in [Books > History > Americas > United States > Revolution & Founding](#)

## Customer Reviews

Linda K. Kerber's *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* presents a unique analysis of the affect of the American Revolution on the status of women in the early Republic. Kerber draws the majority of her evidence from "letters[,] diaries, court records, petitions to legislatures, pamphlets, and books" (xi). Interestingly, Kerber claims that the historical establishment has long ignored the valuable information these documents provide about women during this period. Kerber organizes this text topically into nine chapters and includes numerous illustrations, an index, a short section on sources, and footnotes. Kerber's primary thesis is that women played an essential role in the war effort and on the home front, and to ignore their experiences and contributions impedes the historical understanding of this period. Kerber also argues that the American Revolution was immediately, much more beneficial for men, than it was for women. In the first chapter of *Women of the Republic*, Kerber discusses the how the philosophical foundations of the American Revolution did not establish a place for women in the public sphere of a republic. According to Kerber, Enlightenment philosophers, such as Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Locke, who influenced revolutionary thought in the colonies, focused solely on the role men would play in a republic. When these philosophers did mention women, they often relegated them to subservience. For instance, Hobbes saw the state as a "male enterprise" and went on to write that men "are naturally fitter than women...for actions of labour [sic] and danger" (16, 17). Despite his condemnation of the contemporary social order, Rousseau advocated a similar position for women. Kerber describes Rousseau as finding comfort in the fact that women "would remain deferential to their men, clean in their household habits, [and] complaisant [sic] in their conversation" (23). As such, both Hobbes and Rousseau firmly upheld the belief that a man's proper domain is the public sphere, while a woman's is the private sphere. John Locke, on the other hand, suggests that a more equal relationship should exist between men and women, but he stops short of articulating the role that women might play in the public sphere. Based upon these three philosophers' positions, Kerber persuasively argues that the philosophical underpinnings of the American Revolution did not lay a foundation for women in the public sphere of

a republic. Notwithstanding this lack of a philosophical foundation for a public role for women in a republic, the American Revolution provided many ways for women to become involved in the public sphere. While most female patriots did not fight in battle, they did play significant roles in enforcing embargoes against British made goods; creating, distributing, and signing various petitions; managing business matters in their husbands' absence; and ensuring that merchants did not hoard essential goods. Women also became refugees when their communities became battlegrounds. Other women played a more direct role in the war effort as nurses, cooks, and laundresses. Kerber argues that, in these capacities, women did play an important role in the Revolution, but typically on an individual basis and in a way that did not seriously challenge contemporary gender roles. Still, there were some women, such as Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren, who did actively engage in public and private political discourse during this period. Adams demonstrates her passion of politics in a letter to Warren when she writes: I would not have my Friend imagine [sic] that with all my fears and apprehension, I would give up one iota of our rights and privileges [sic] ... we cannot be happy without being free ... we cannot be free without being secure in our property, ... we cannot be secure in our property if without our consent others may as by right take it away. (82) Based upon these examples, Kerber argues that the American Revolution allowed women to establish the foundation for political involvement, while maintaining their domestic responsibilities. Kerber cites the American abolitionist movement of the early 1800s as proof of this assertion. Nevertheless, the American Revolution was not entirely positive for women. Perhaps most importantly, immediately after the war ended, opportunities for women to become politically involved disappeared. In many cases, women's legal rights also suffered after the war. For instance, while a few state courts upheld women's common law dower rights, several others abolished them. Kerber describes women's loss of dower rights as "the most important legal development directly affecting the women of the early Republic," but the erosion of women's legal rights does not stop there (147). Despite the republican justification for divorce, it was still very difficult for women to attain one. Moreover, despite revolutionary republican rhetoric about justifications for the education of women, they were still constrained by the belief that a woman's proper domain was in the home. Even a contemporary women's magazine warned, "[L]earning in men was the road to preferment ... consequences very opposite were the result of the same quality in women" (198-199). Despite the postwar setbacks and the cultural taboo surrounding the education of women, literature written by women demonstrates that the Revolution caused a change in the way women understood themselves. Postwar fiction written by women, for example, advocates that during times of conflict, women are best served by controlling their own destinies and not relying upon men to make decisions for them.

In describing such a text, Kerber writes, "The message...is simple and obvious...[e]ven in the exigencies of war, women must control themselves and their options" (271). Kerber continues, "[women] who take political positions, make their own judgment of contending sides, [and] risk their lives - emerge stronger and in control" (271). Yet, this position was very controversial. Kerber concludes that the only culturally acceptable way for women to be involved in the public sphere after the American Revolution, was to preach the virtues of the Republic as a patriotic educator in the home. This ideal is known as Republican Motherhood. Kerber's *Women of the Republic* is an essential component of the historiography of the early Republic, because it fills in the gaps left by traditional histories of this era, such as Gordon S. Wood's *Empire of Liberty*. This text also shows that to ignore women, the domestic sphere, and the cultural controversy surrounding women's involvement in the public sphere, is to do a profound injustice to this important period of American history. Perhaps the only weakness of this text is the lack of a proper bibliography, but this omission may be the fault of the publisher. Therefore, this reviewer enthusiastically recommends *Women of the Republic* as an excellent complement to a larger historical synthesis of this period of history.

Bibliography  
Wood, Gordon S. *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

First off- if you aren't interested in history, don't read this. It is a truly academic book, not light reading. However, if this subject matter interests you, it is really incredible. Too often do people forget that women were half of the population then as well as now, and their perspectives and evolved ideology during this era are discussed at length. Kerber hammers away at her analysis again and again, and really stresses the idea of "Republican Motherhood". This is the story of how women, who were denied rights as citizens and even as human beings to a large extent, invented a new role in the wake of a revolution that stressed the principles of equality and fair representation. This new role was a renewed purpose as mothers; suddenly women had a duty to become well-educated and emphasize virtue, in order to become fit enough to instill American values into patriotic sons. Obviously, this new ideal had its negatives and positives, and further set the stage for women's struggles to come. Kerber also focuses on the issues of divorce, coverture, and education. She uses as evidence a wide variety of case studies that fascinate and illuminate a period of time when many other history books seem to have forgotten women existed at all. Bravo, Kerber!

Kerber effectively demonstrates the limits of women's roles at the outset of the American Revolution and shows how these roles changed. For instance, Enlightenment thinkers, such as Rousseau,

thought that women should be confined to politically passive domestic duties (a view which prevailed at the beginning of the Revolution). Kerber focuses on several women--Mercy Otis Warren, Abigail Adams and Mary Wollstonecraft--who exemplified politically active women that defied these 'Enlightenment' views. Though these women were the exception, they influenced other women that it was acceptable to be politically informed and still excel in their domestic duties. According to Kerber, this led to a political transformation of women's roles termed "Republican Motherhood," a concept that encouraged women to be informed politically and use their domestic influence to raise virtuous republican sons, and to politically influence brothers, husbands and fathers. This transformation from politically inactive domestic roles to active, Kerber argues, laid the foundation for the women's rights and abolitionist's movements.

personally i felt the book sucked, was long, boring, etc. however, it is very well written, arguments are backed, etc. Kerber wrote a masterpiece if this subject interests you. i only read it for class. so if you're looking for some quick info about the book: the main point of it is republican motherhood: the idea that women in the revolution could have a political influence, without being able to vote, by shaping the ideals and morals of their children, boys to vote and lead, and the girls to raise other good boys. i would definitely read the entire introduction 2 times as it overviews the whole book. the last 10 pages are worth reading too

I had to read this book for class. FREAKING BORING. the happiest day of the summer was the day i finished this book.

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