

Chapter One

In the Beginning, 1637 to 1840

It was a tiny ad placed in an obscure newspaper. The *Seneca County Courier*, a weekly paper delivered to farms in the cold country of upstate New York, ran just three sentences in its edition for July 14, 1848. The simple announcement invited women to a discussion of “the social, civil, and religious rights of women.”

This little news release shook the earth. From the tiny town of Seneca Falls in 1848, a mighty flood of disruptive ideas reached around the world and into the twenty-first century. The global expansion of human rights for women—the notion that women are full human beings and that women’s rights are human rights—began here, in a little country church that we, the recipients of hard-fought victories, thoughtlessly have allowed to be destroyed. Ideas live on after buildings go, however, and the voices of these women still echo with words we need to hear.

Why Seneca Falls, New York? Why July 1848? The answer, of course, is that ideas find their time and place in people. The unpretentious circumstances of many women’s lives, however, often obscure the power of their minds. We may find it difficult to believe that culture-changing concepts can emerge from a tea table in a country kitchen, but the humble truth is that it was Seneca Falls because Lucretia Mott visited Elizabeth Cady Stanton there. It was 1848 because it was the first time that these busy mothers could manage to get together after their vow to do so in 1840. And the other truth is that both of these women were not only brilliant, but also possessed extraordinary courage.

It is altogether typical of the history of American women that it was their moral sense, their mutual effort to do good for others, that drew Mott and Stanton together. For them and for many other women, the cause of women's rights long would be subordinated to other moral crusades, especially that of abolishing slavery. The Seneca Falls meeting was, in fact, directly rooted in other meetings, especially the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention in London.

There were other moral and intellectual roots. More than 200 years before Seneca Falls, a woman named Anne Hutchinson defied the dominant leadership and exercised her right to free speech. In 1637, the theocrats who ran the newly founded colony of Massachusetts tried and convicted Hutchinson of sedition because her religious ideas did not agree with theirs. Her brand of feminine spirituality was proving more popular than their harsh theology, and, when prominent young men exhibited their respect for this female leadership, Hutchinson was banished. At age 46, heavily pregnant for the twelfth time, she accepted exile rather than surrender her independent ideas. It literally cost her life; a few years later, Hutchinson and most of her children were killed by Algonquins in the Long Island Sound area where she had settled after banishment from the safety of Boston.

Although shamefully few Americans know it, an even more powerful case for female participation in the exchange of ideas was made by Hutchinson's

friend Mary Dyer. The only person courageous enough to protest when Hutchinson was excommunicated from their Boston church, Dyer returned to England in 1652; there, she converted to the newly founded Society of Friends, more commonly called Quakers. While she was abroad, Massachusetts and Connecticut passed laws banning Quakers, and Dyer was exiled from both colonies upon her 1657 return. Although she could have remained safely in more liberal Long Island, she defied convention—and the pleading of her husband and sons—



Anne Hutchinson preaching in her house in Boston. (Library of Congress)

to repeatedly return to Boston to preach her vision of a loving, egalitarian God. On June 1, 1660, the theocracy of Massachusetts, which was both church and state, hanged Mary Dyer.

The Quaker beliefs that she professed soon became America's most important intellectual root of female freedom. Founded in England by George Fox, the Society of Friends quickly established itself in America. Women were important participants in the Quaker movement from the beginning: the group consistently committed itself to the idea of human equality. From the beginning, Quaker women were considered to have an inner light from God just as men did, and they were equally entitled to express moral and spiritual ideas. Nor were their views limited to the quiet of Quaker meeting houses; women were ordained and engaged in street preaching just as men were.

As Quaker culture evolved, especially in Pennsylvania, female leaders developed schools, hospitals, and other charitable organizations, and they controlled financial decisions on these enterprises. Older women also exercised strong powers over younger women, including resolving such personal issues as whether or not a young woman should accept a particular marriage proposal. Obviously, voting of a sort was inherent to such decision making, but because Quakers in general did not participate in secular government, their internal egalitarianism did not necessarily translate into a movement for political equality.

Quakers also were exceptional in seeing American Indians as full human beings—although even Quakers assumed their own religion to be the correct one. They sent missionaries to convert the natives, and, like virtually all other newcomers, took little heed of the political models offered by native societies. In some of those societies, especially the tribes of the northeastern Iroquois Confederacy, women were powerful. In many tribes that practiced farming, the culture was matrilineal. This was a crucial distinction from Europeans, for it meant that children took their mothers' names and traced their families through the maternal, not the paternal, lineage. Thus, it was impossible to be a bastard, and the European shame of illegitimacy was unknown. Beyond that, matrilineal societies rejected the newcomers' patriarchal view of women as the property of their fathers and husbands. In the Iroquois tribes that northeastern settlers encountered, for instance, a newly married man went to live with his wife's family, and his children belonged to that clan, not to his. Personal possessions were relatively rare, but those that did exist were passed on through

the mother's line, not the father's. If a marriage did not work out, couples easily separated, and the man went home to his mother.

Moreover, in many tribes, women held genuine political and military power. Women in the Iroquois Confederation, for example, traditionally controlled the fate of captives: they decided if a prisoner of war was to be killed, tortured, held for ransom, or adopted into the tribe. Although Pocahontas lived farther south, her famous intercession on behalf of John Smith thus can be seen as the native rule, not the exception. In the southeast, Cherokee women sometimes participated in actual combat and earned the title of "War Woman." During Massachusetts warfare in 1676, the Pocasset band of Wamponoag was led by a woman named Wetamoo, whose head was displayed on the Taunton town square when only 26 of her 300 men survived the battle.

Indian women held their own councils and participated in treaty-making with whites—much to the annoyance of a number of white writers. Indeed, in the same year of 1848 that whites held their first women's rights convention, the Seneca tribe of the Iroquois Confederation adopted a new constitution. Under its provisions, both men and women elected judges and legislators, and all major decisions had to be ratified by three-fourths of the voters and by three-fourths of the clan mothers. Despite this, historians deem this period to mark a decline in the status of Seneca women: after their men interacted with European men, Seneca and other native women would continually lose traditional rights as their cultures adopted the white example.

Few Americans, however, were aware of these alternative societal structures, and almost none were willing to emulate the "savages"—or even the egalitarian ideas of their Quaker missionaries. Nevertheless, there were other female political leaders in mainstream colonial America, many of whom have been forgotten and remain unrecognized even by modern feminists. Lady Deborah Moody, for example, led the first English settlement of what is now Brooklyn when she took followers of her religious ideas there in 1643. They left Massachusetts because of disagreements with Governor John Winthrop, who called Lady Deborah "a dangerous woeman [sic]." Like Anne Hutchinson, her home was attacked by Native Americans. But Moody not only survived, she stayed there, holding steadfast to political and religious liberty. She also paid the natives for their land and went on to build an enlightened community.

Other charismatic religious women led similar settlements, making themselves, in effect, political leaders. Jemima Wilkinson, who called herself

the “Publick Universal Friend,” took some 300 men and women into the wilderness of western New York in 1788, where her commune established peaceful relationships with its Seneca neighbors. “Mother” Ann Lee was even more successful. She immigrated from England just before the outbreak of the American Revolution, and, distrusted by both sides, was imprisoned for the pacifism she preached. Within a decade, her original eight disciples expanded to several thousand; eventually, the Shaker movement that she founded developed economically successful colonies in 18 states.

It was not coincidental that rebellious women—Hutchinson, Dyer, Moody, Wilkinson, Lee, and others—took refuge in New Netherland and its later version, New York. The Dutch who settled there in 1626 not only were religiously tolerant, they also were exceptionally egalitarian in their treatment of women. Colonial Dutch women retained their maiden names, which were recreated each generation with a father’s first name used as a girl’s surname. Married women not only had property rights, but also, commonly, prenuptial agreements. Most significantly, Dutch women engaged in a great deal of commercial enterprise, even after marriage.

Margaret Hardenbroeck, for example, owned a shipping line, exporting furs and importing merchandise from Holland; despite two marriages and five children, she frequently sailed across the Atlantic on business. Polly Provoost also was an importer; she attracted customers by laying America’s first sidewalk outside of her business. Annejte Loockermans Van Cortlandt paved the first street in America; her daughter, Maria Van Rensselaer, eventually controlled a 24-square-mile Albany fiefdom. Among the first public expenditures in New Amsterdam was the construction of a house for the colony’s midwife, Tryntje Jonas; her daughter, pioneer settler Annetje Jans, farmed 62 acres of land along Broadway, and her granddaughter, Sara Roeloef, was employed as an interpreter among English, Dutch, and Algonquin speakers. Although none of these women voted or held office, a historian of early Manhattan described Van Cortlandt’s home as “one of the centres of the petticoat government that so often controlled the affairs of the Colony.”

The least covert, most undeniable political power exercised by a colonial woman was that of Catholic Maryland’s Margaret Brent. Although from a noble family, she emigrated when Lord Baltimore granted her a tract of land as an inducement. Presumably he saw her as more talented than two of her brothers, for she led them, a sister, and servants to Maryland in 1638. Remaining

determinedly single, she owned thousands of acres of land. When the governor, Lord Baltimore's younger brother, lay dying, he granted his power of attorney to her, and she ran the colony after his death. After Lord Baltimore, comfortable back in England, complained about one of her decisions, Maryland's legislative assembly backed her judgment call, not his: without Mistress Brent, they averred, "All would have gone to ruin."

English-speaking colonial women, of course, benefited from the examples of seventeenth-century Queen Mary and especially the highly successful Elizabeth I, followed in the next century by Mary II and Anne. The English idea that a woman was capable of being the supreme monarch was rarely replicated on the European continent, Spain's Isabella notwithstanding, and the status of women in French and Spanish colonies reflected this lesser place. Nor did the Catholic Church of France and Spain offer women roles analogous to those of Protestant women, especially Quakers. Although Spain's Catholic colonies were North America's first and priests held significant roles in them, more than two centuries would pass before the first Spanish sisterhoods arrived.

Spanish colonial women did enjoy some social freedoms that Anglo women lacked—dancing, drinking, smoking, gambling, wearing more comfortable clothing—but any aspirations to educational and political equality were more difficult. As late as the nineteenth century, for example, Catholic women in California were actively discouraged from even reading.

In contrast, reading was fundamental to Protestantism. Especially in the Puritan colonies of New England, girls were taught to read so that they could properly inculcate religious principles in their children. It is therefore wholly appropriate that the nation's first written feminist theory came from its original Puritan settlement, Salem. It was the work of an intellectual giant whose name should be well known, but again, few Americans are familiar with Judith Sargent Stevens Murray.

A childless sea captain's wife, Murray had time to think. In 1784—almost a decade before English Mary Wollstonecraft published the much more famous *Vindication of the Rights of Women*—she wrote on the need for improved female self-esteem, "Encouraging a Degree of Self-Complacency, Especially in Female Bosoms." The thoughts she expressed are still being rediscovered by women today:

Will it be said that the judgment of a male of two years old is more sage than that of a female of the same age? I believe the reverse is generally observed to be true. But from that period what partiality! How is the one exalted and the other depressed.... The one is taught to aspire, and the other is early confined and limited.

Murray eventually collected her essays into three books, the sales of which were promoted by George Washington, and at least one critic has compared her work with that of Noah Webster. Yet after her 1820 death in the wilderness of Mississippi, where she had gone to live with a daughter she bore by her second husband, Judith Sargent Murray's brilliant mind was soon forgotten.

A better-known writer of the same era is Mercy Otis Warren. Perhaps her work is remembered both because it was less feminist and because she was well-connected to male leadership. The wife and the sister of governmental officials, Warren had a political insider's view of the tumultuous days of the American Revolution; indeed, she played her own significant role in bringing on the rebellion by anonymously publishing satires of the British. While her chief purpose in writing was political in the usual sense of the word, Warren also included asides that made feminist points. "Hateall," for example, a character in one of her plays, not only represented British brutality toward colonists, but also was a blatant misogynist. In a tavern scene, he boasted that he married only to win his wife's dowry and then "broke her skirts." His recommendation for a "rebellious dame" was "the green Hick'ry or the willow twig."

Although both Warren and Murray called for greater respect for women, they nevertheless published much of their work under pseudonyms, and neither ever suggested the vote for women or even demanded clearly defined rights to property, custody, or other legal empowerments. Abigail Adams, who never published, was more assertive about political inclusion of women in her voluminous correspondence with the era's important men.

Future president John Adams acknowledged that it was his wife's property management ability that allowed him to spend his life in politics, and their records make it evident that she was the business executive of the family. And yet, although John had great respect for Abigail and their marriage was ideally companionate, he laughed off her most famous call for female freedom. When he met with the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, she wrote from

their farm near Boston in March 1776—well before July’s Declaration of Independence. “I long to hear you have declared an independency,” she said, “and, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make,”



Abigail Adams (Library of Congress)

I desire you would remember the ladies and be more favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention are not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion and will not hold ourselves bound to obey any laws in which we have no voice or representation. That your sex are naturally tyrannical is a truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of master for the more tender and endearing one of friend.

Her husband’s reply was amused; rolling eyes and a quizzical grin seem to suffuse his words. Not only did he treat her demand for respect as cute, he could not even grant that these creative thoughts were her own:

As to your extraordinary code of laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our struggle has loosened the bands of government everywhere—that children and apprentices were disobedient, that schools and colleges were grown turbulent.... But your letter was the first intimation that another tribe, more numerous and powerful than all the rest, were grown discontented.... Depend on it, we know better than to repeal our masculine systems.... I begin to think the British as deep as they are wicked at stirring up Tories, Canadians, Indians, Negroes, Irish, Roman Catholics, and, at last, they have stimulated the women to demand new privileges and threaten to rebel.

Abigail Adams's and Mercy Otis Warren's feminist arguments were clearly subordinate to their mainstream political ideas, for it was the success of the new nation that motivated the majority of the words they wrote. Yet the rhetoric of freedom—as John Adams reluctantly acknowledged—inevitably encouraged rebellion among the less privileged. It was simply impossible to proclaim a Declaration of Independence that spoke of “life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness” and of “the consent of the governed” without inspiring hopes that those words might mean what they say.

Perhaps these women of the Revolutionary Age influenced the political climate more than is easily traced, for the same era did produce the first actual voting rights for women. In 1776, the first official year of the Revolution, New Jersey implicitly granted the vote to its women when it adopted a constitution that enfranchised “all free inhabitants.” English-speaking women, however, had long experience with gender-neutral language that did not actually mean to include them. In Virginia, too, similar gender-neutral language implied an enfranchisement of which women remained unaware. When Hannah Lee Corbin wrote her brother, General Richard Henry Lee, in 1778 to protest the taxation of women without representation, he replied that Virginia “women were already possessed of that right”—something that seems to have been news to her.

Not surprisingly, such ambiguous and unpublicized enfranchisement meant that few women actually cast ballots. Surprisingly, almost a decade after the Revolution's end, its spirit still prevailed: in 1790, the New Jersey legislature confirmed that it indeed had meant what it said by adding the words “he or