



Liberty's Daughters:



Did the American Revolution Empower Women?

We saw on a previous exhibit board some of the arguments that historians have made in favor of the idea that the American Revolution empowered women. On this board, we will look at arguments to the contrary, as well a more recent interpretation that finds middle ground.



Guillaume Fouace, "La Dernier Fileuse de Mon Village" (1880), public domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4443611>.

Connecticut Women Actually Lost Some Legal Rights

Recent studies of changes in women's legal rights in New England, from the early colonial period to the early 19th century, describe a pattern in which courts increasingly marginalized women's legal status. In *Women Before the Bar: Gender, Law, and Society in Connecticut, 1639-1789*, University of Connecticut Professor Cornelia Hughes Dayton maintains, based on her study of court cases in New Haven, that Connecticut women were increasingly "marginalized" in legal proceedings over the course of the 1700s. In the 1600s, Connecticut courts applied Puritan standards of justice as opposed to the more patriarchal English law. Somewhat counterintuitively, Puritan courts listened to women's testimony, held men and well as women accountable for sexual misbehavior, took a more community-based approach to arbitrating legal disputes, and gave women a greater voice than was the case in England at the same time. Dayton does not maintain that women had equal legal rights with men in Puritan Connecticut, as they clearly did not. Rather, she argues that Puritan law was "an outlier" within the wider scope of Western jurisprudence in that it was ever so slightly less patriarchal. However, writes Dayton, all that began to change in the late 1600s, with the most dramatic changes occurring in the 1730s and 1740s. Two things happened: Revolutionary Puritanism waned, and a pronounced "embourgeoisement" took hold as landowning men became increasingly affluent — both of which promoted the replacement of Puritan law with English law and a consequent strengthening of patriarchy. The American Revolution, Dayton believes, did nothing to interrupt this long-term process, but in fact strengthened it. After the Revolution, new state laws continued more then ever rested on a base of English common law as opposed to Puritan law, and the process of embourgeoisement became even more pronounced.

DAUGHTERS of Liberty

The Revolution as a Catalyst for Long-Term Economic Change

The historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich maintains that long-term changes in the Connecticut economy, not the Revolution specifically, empowered women, although she admits that the Revolution acted as a catalyst. While most historians — both amateur and professional — have assumed that Connecticut women had always spun and weaved as part of the household economy of colonial times, Ulrich, in *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (2002) cites evidence that (1) spinning became more widespread in the early 1700s than it had been earlier, and (2) before the mid-1700s, weaving had been a task largely carried out by male artisans, but in the middle years of the century (shortly before the Revolution) it had become a female rather than a male activity. Ulrich maintains that these changes enhanced the economic power of women. The result was not equality, alas, but it was progress. Although these changes began earlier in the 18th century, the Revolution nevertheless acted as a catalyst (a historical event that speeds up a historical process already underway), in that the Revolution brought an end to the old mercantilist law that had forbidden the former colonists from exporting yarn, thread, cloth, or finished textiles — even homespun — outside of their own colony. After the Revolution, Connecticut women continued to produce homespun, but now for a much wider, global market, giving them increased economic power.

In 1640, Ulrich writes, spinning wheels were rare in colonial New England. But in the 1640s, colonial governments in New England took steps to encourage raising flax for linen and sheep for wool, and importing cotton from the British West Indies. Probate records show that ownership of spinning wheels increased. "Before 1649, only 15 percent of estates listed spinning wheels," writes Ulrich. "By 1660 that had risen to 40 percent." As colonial production of homespun increased, a concerned Parliament in 1699 forbade the exportation of colonial textiles, so that they wouldn't compete with British goods. Nevertheless, colonial production of homespun continued to increase, the spinning done by women at home but with most of the weaving done by professional male weavers. In the mid-1700s, however, a transition occurred in weaving, too, as that task was taken over by women. By the time of the Revolution, three quarters of Connecticut's households owned spinning wheels and 20 percent had looms.

Ulrich explains: "In a period when men were sending their sons to sea or ... apprenticing them to joiners, coopers, cordwainers, and silversmiths, their daughters were learning to weave. Some worked for wages, but most worked within the anonymity of the household production system.... Household production allowed New Englanders to spend less on British goods...." The shift empowered women. "A daughter who could work on her own, in or out of the house, no longer had to rely on her father to settle accounts with a storekeeper or with local craftsmen.... The locus of responsibility had shifted ever so subtly from familial to individual enterprise." The Revolution catalyzed this long-term trend, first be increasing the local demand for homespun during the nonimportation movement and the War for Independence, and then, after the war, by opening overseas markets to New England homespun. AS the producers of homespun, women now negotiated directly with local merchants and enjoyed increased buying power.