



Liberty's Daughters:

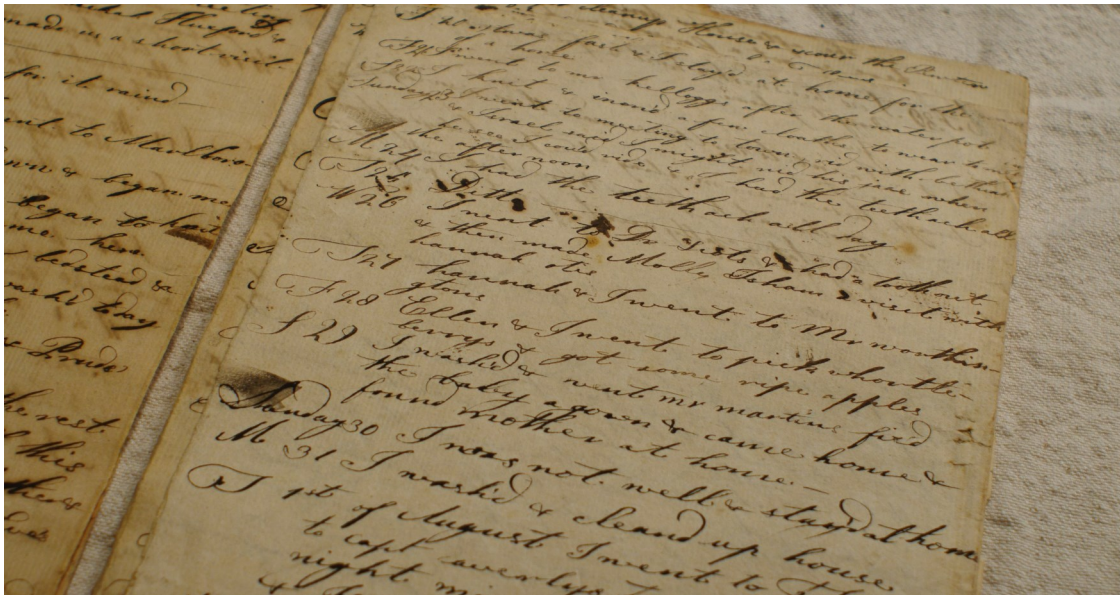


Nonimportation and Women in Northeastern Connecticut

We believe that most women in northeastern Connecticut, like most men, supported nonimportation. But specific examples are hard to come by. Unlike men, women did not sign petitions, serve on committees of correspondence, or vote as members of town councils. Outside of Boston and Philadelphia, women rarely published letters to the editor in local newspapers (or, if they did, they did not use their own names). But there are some examples of northeastern Connecticut women who participated in nonimportation known to history, and we can examine them.

Elizabeth "Betty" Foote of Coventry

Elizabeth "Betty" Foote was born in Colchester, CT, in 1750, the eldest of four children. Betty created two important historical artifacts that today reside in the collections of the Connecticut Museum of Culture and History (formerly the Connecticut Historical Society) in Hartford — a marvelous bed rug and a laconic diary, which she kept from January through October, 1775. Still unmarried at 25, Betty and her younger siblings cared for the Foote family farm in Colchester while their parents tended a second farm a few miles away. Most of Betty's diary describes her large litany of household chores, which included many hours spinning and weaving homespun. Yet, the great events of 1775 also appear in the diary, although briefly. Although Betty's entries are short, they are enough to reveal her as a patriot sympathizer. "In the morning we heard they had begun to fight at Boston," she wrote on April 21. The next day she added, "I just got the work done up and the Quills filled when Jonah came & tell'd me I must go to making Biscuit for us to carry to fight the regulars which I did and bak'd a pudding & you may guess the rest." Betty indicated that she well understood the connection between her many hours spent producing homespun and the patriot cause, remarking that she had hired a neighbor to help her spin yarn, who had "felt Nationally into the bargain." Betty's bed rug is a fine example of a high quality homespun textile. In the 18th century, rugs were used less as floor coverings and more as thick, warm bed covers. (In the 1700s, blankets were much thinner than today and were more like woolen sheets.) The amount of skill and practice that went into Betty's bed rug is impressive. As long as Americans boycotted British textiles, it was imperative that that they make their own, and the skilled labor of women like Betty Foote was essential to victory.



Betty Foote's bed rug and diary, both in the collections of the Connecticut Museum of Culture and History. Upper left: Photo courtesy of Connecticut Museum of Culture and History, obj. #1959.56.0. Center: Three details, photos by Suzanne LaTulipe. Right: Photo by Sandra McAlduff. Lower left: Page from Foote's diary, obj. #54425, photo by Suzanne LaTulipe.



At left: Flax wheel from the collection of the Mill Museum.

Theodora Flint of Windham

The enthusiastic Windhamites rejoiced in this signal opportunity of testing their patriotism and devotion. Home raised food and home-spun clothes came at once into use and fashion. A decoction of the common red-root 'of very salutary nature,' under the dignified appellation of Hyperion or Labrador tea, replaced the prohibited Hyson and Bohea. Ribbons, laces and all foreign finery were vociferously eschewed by the ardent 'Daughters of Liberty.' The wedding of Miss Dora Flint during this December was made a grand patriotic demonstration. The numerous guests from Norwich and Windham were all arrayed in home-spun. The bountiful refreshments were of colonial production, their flavor heightened by patriotic fervor.

Ellen Larned, History of Windham County, Connecticut (Worcester: 1880), v. 2, p. 117

"Miss Dora Flint" was almost certainly Theodora Flint (b. 1739) of Windham, CT, who married Jonathan Kennedy (b. 1732) in 1767. Sometime between 1771 and 1773, Dora and Jonathan moved to nearby Willington, CT. Dora's parents were Joshua Flint (1689-1747), a mariner lost at sea, and Deborah Ingalls Flint (1694-1792). Although Joshua and Deborah Flint were married in Andover, MA, in 1715, by 1716 they were living in Windham. Dora and Jonathan would have at least five children: Patrick (1769-1813), John (b. 1771), Phebe Tennard (b. 1773), Olive (1777-1794), and Sophia (b. 1779). We cannot be sure that it was Dora herself that insisted that the wedding guests all wear homespun and who served only Connecticut-made refreshments, but it seems likely that it was — or, at least, she supported the idea. Her husband-to-be did not yet have legal control over her, and her mariner father was no longer living.

Huldah and Lucinda Dyer

One Windham woman who would have supported the patriot side was Huldah Dyer, the wife of Eliphalet Dyer, the wealthiest man in Windham, a leader of the local Committee of Correspondence, and a delegate to both the Stamp Act Congress and Continental Congress, where he signed the Continental Association that organized nonimportation on a multi-colony basis. Whatever her personal feelings, it is inconceivable that Huldah would have opposed her husband on nonimportation, not publicly anyway. It is quite likely that she produced her fair share of homespun. Born Huldah Bowen in Providence in c. 1726, she married Eliphalet 1745. Huldah died in 1800 and Eliphalet in 1807. One result of their sequence of deaths is that Eliphalet's very brief (only one page) probate inventory lists no women's tools. Doubtless, they had all been given away to family or friends after Huldah's death.

While it is likely that Huldah knew how to spin and sew, it is also quite possible that she didn't engage in those tasks nearly as often as Betty Foote, who came from middling stock. The Dyers could afford to enslave people to labor for them. Eliphalet owned eight slaves in 1790, and evidence indicates that he had even more during the Revolution. None of the Dyer slaves were recorded in the Census by name, and only four — three men and one woman — are now known by name. The woman was Lucinda Dyer, who lived long enough to be recorded as a free woman of color in the 1850 U.S. Census, the first census to record the names of all household members. In 1850, Lucinda Dyer, although free, still lived in the household of one of Eliphalet and Huldah's descendants. She was 80 years old and "past work." Lucinda was born in c. 1770, after most of the prewar protests were over. She would have been only six when independence was declared in 1776 and thirteen when it was won in 1783 — not old enough to have done weaving, but old enough to help the older slaves produce homespun. The labor of Lucinda Dyer and other enslaved girls and women was vital to the patriot victory.

Names of Slaves	Eliphalet Dyer	John Sanford	Debra Pruckus	Federick Barker	Mary Gray	Phenias Abbe	Clay Petcher	Sarah Kennedy	Thomas Silvester	Benjamin Brewster	Sarah Gray	All other Slaves
Windham	220											
Nov. Eliphalet Dyer	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
John Sanford	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Debra Pruckus	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Federick Barker	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Mary Gray	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Phenias Abbe	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Clay Petcher	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Sarah Kennedy	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Thomas Silvester	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Benjamin Brewster	4	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Sarah Gray	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

At left: Detail from 1790 United States Manuscript Census, showing the Eliphalet Dyer household in Windham, CT. Dyer owned eight slaves that year, including Lucinda, born in 1770.