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Socio-Economic Influence on Women's Pre-Revolutionary Political Thought and Activism

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HIS 302A: The British Empire, 1688-1815

Brad Wood

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Thesis

Pre-revolutionary women with greater economic independence, or women who maintained connections to men involved in politics, openly expressed their political opinions and participated in or organized important political events more freely than lower working class women because their livelihoods did not depend on support from Loyalist and Patriot patrons.

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The colonists who fought alongside their English compatriots in the French and Indian War to preserve the British Empire's interests in America could not have known that in twenty years many among their ranks would have turned sides, waged, and won a war against their mother country, and successfully established the United States of America as an independent nation. Clearly, the public's opinion of the British monarchy shifted dramatically between the end of the French and Indian War in 1763 and the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776; in only thirteen years, the Americans had moved from fighting alongside the British to fighting against them. What changed? The British government could no longer fund their foreign wars (the Seven Years' War officially began in 1754; between 1756 and the first skirmishes of the revolution at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, the British fought in the Anglo-Cherokee War, Tacky's War, Pontiac's Rebellion, and the First Anglo-Mysore War). To pay for all of this fighting, Parliament implemented taxes on the American colonists even though the colonies had been largely self-governing and had little representation in London's House of Lords or the House of Commons.¹ The Sugar Act of 1764 and the Stamp Act of 1765 led to protests and importation boycotts in every colony.² Parliament passed the Townshend Acts of 1767 to regain control over the increasingly rebellious colonists, but those only made the Americans angrier and more organized in their protests.³ British officers occupied the colonies and the 1774 Intolerable/Coercive Acts, which closed the Boston Port, prevented Massachusetts from electing a local government, allowed officers to circumvent local justice for trials in England, and reinstated quartering, instigated more rebellion.⁴ Conflicts between colonists and British officials

¹Endnotes

James L. Roark, Michael P. Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, Susan M. Hartmann, *The American Promise: A Concise History*, 6th ed., vol. 1, *To 1877* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2017), 1: 153.

² Roark, 154-157.

³ Roark, 159.

⁴ Roark, 165.

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increased until remaining united with Great Britain was inconceivable to many and an illegal Continental Congress committed treason to declare the thirteen colonies an independent nation.⁵

Changing public sentiment for King George III's monarchy and the British government is evident in the letters, pamphlets, diaries, newspaper articles, and books published by Patriots in the years between the two wars, but gender roles of the late eighteenth century impaired who was allowed to be involved in the political conversation and what documents were published (and still survive today), as well as the research historians have published on the topic. It is an undeniable fact that women were affected by and involved in the rapidly changing political mindset of pre-revolutionary Colonial America. Gender expectations limited women's ability to speak about politics and be taken seriously, but did not prevent it. Despite the social expectations that encouraged women to be quiet and unopinionated, especially on issues outside of the home, there are many notable examples of women who were politically active before the revolution, not only by participating in boycotts and creating homespun clothing, but also encouraging political conversations in their communities, writing about politics, and organizing political events—activities that were decidedly outside the domestic sphere. While gender roles did hinder women's political participation, female political thought and activism in the era between Great Britain's victory in the French and Indian War and the United States' official Declaration of Independence from Britain was influenced more by socio-economic factors. Pre-revolutionary women with greater economic independence, or women who maintained connections to men involved in politics, openly expressed their political opinions and participated in or organized important political events more freely than lower working class women because their livelihoods did not depend on support from Loyalist and Patriot patrons. Rich and poor women in Colonial America were all affected by politics, but while upper and middle class women could and were

⁵ Roark, 182-183.

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often encouraged to participate in politics as Patriot sentiments grew, poor women had to either remain neutral or support the beliefs of their community's majority, regardless of their personal political opinions, to not inhibit their ability to support themselves and their families.

The study of Colonial American women's history has gradually increased in popularity in the last fifty years, primarily through the work of female historians, but there is not an overwhelming amount of research on women in the time period between the French and Indian War and the Revolutionary War. Most works are case studies of notable women who either are well known for their participation in the Revolution and/or left behind letters and diaries, or studies of events that women participated in, such as tea parties and non-importation petitions. There are a few works on the topic of gender roles and colonial women's ability to participate in politics written in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, such as historian Ruth H. Bloch's article "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America" and media historian David Copeland's examination of the representation of women in Colonial newspapers in "Virtuous and Vicious: The Dual Portrayal of Women in Colonial American Newspapers."⁶ Several articles published in the 1980s and 1990s study the connections between culture, patriotism, and commercial activity in revolutionary America such as the works by historians Bill Baller, T. H. Breen, and Joan R. Gunderson.⁷ Patricia Cleary's "'She Will Be in the Shop': Women's Sphere of Trade in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia and New York," focuses specifically on women and trade.⁸ There are a few other studies of women including an article

⁶ Ruth H. Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," *Signs* 13, no. 2 (1987): 38-39; David Copeland, "Virtuous and Vicious: The Dual Portrayal of Women in Colonial Newspapers," *American Periodicals* 5, (1995): 60, 64.

⁷ Bill Baller, "Kinship and Culture in the Mobilization of Colonial Massachusetts," *The Historian* 57, no. 2 (1995): 291-302; T. H. Breen, "Narrative of Commercial Life: Consumption, Ideology, and Community on the Eve of the American Revolution," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (July 1993): 471-501; Joan R. Gunderson, "Independence, Citizenship, and the American Revolution," *Signs* 13, no. 1 (1987): 59-77.

⁸ Patricia Cleary, "'She Will Be in the Shop': Women's Sphere of Trade in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia and New York," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 119, no. 3 (July 1995): 181-202.

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examining Loyalist women before and during the war, and an article about Colonial women in North Carolina.⁹ In the past twenty years, the subjects of female political participation and women's commercial activity have gained much more attention. There are many case studies of female poets and writers, women who worked on newspapers, in clothing shops, or as apothecaries, and comprehensive studies about how the war affected Loyalist and Patriot women. While each of these articles, essays, and books agree that women were aware of the political atmosphere of the time period and that their lives were affected by the tension between Great Britain and the North American Colonies, none of them specifically argue that their socioeconomic status played a greater role in the extent of their political participation than the limitations of their gender roles.

While gender did not prevent women from having political minds, expectations of female behavior that had long been ingrained in the social culture of England and the North American Colonies made it difficult for women to express their beliefs and have them taken seriously. In 1771, a book by a French man, Pierre Joseph Boidier de Villemert titled *The Ladies Friend* was reprinted in Philadelphia. This book was a "treatise on the virtues and qualifications which are the brightest ornaments of the fair sex, And render them most agreeable to the sensible Part of Mankind," written to explain "real beauty: or, the art of charming."¹⁰ Boidier de Villemert's advice is sometimes contradictory. He stated that he "should be very sorry to live among people who...seclude women," but women should "shun" "the crowd of perpetual company" to "preserve themselves."¹¹ He also believed that "where women rule, men reign...if women can form their ideas and sentiments to the part they act among us," so they should "labour to enlarge

⁹ Mary Beth Norton, "Eighteenth-Century Women in Peace and War: The Case of the Loyalists," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (July 1976); Alan D. Watson, "Women in North Carolina: Overlooked and Underestimated," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 58, no. 1 (January 1981): 1-22.

¹⁰ Pierre Joseph Boudier de Villemert, *The Ladies Friend*, trans. [?], (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1771), title page, *America's Historical Imprints*, Early American Imprints, Series 1, no. 12061.

¹¹ Boudier de Villemert, *The Ladies Friend*, 9.

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their sphere of thought” so that “they will be able occasionally to supply us with useful counsels.”¹² However, this pleasant defense and encouragement of women’s intellect is negated by its misogynistic purpose: “women do not sufficiently consider their own worth,” Boudier de Villemert wrote, and spend too much time worrying “about a beauty to which they can make no addition” when “the purpose of developing a good mind is to keep men after they get used to how pretty you are.”¹³ Women were encouraged to engage themselves in intellectual pursuits that would allow them to have some ability to converse with the men in their lives, but “those female divines, who, from a distempered party zeal...hold synods at their houses, and broach extravagant opinions” were “ridiculous” and “offensive.”¹⁴ Boudier de Villemert did not state outright that women cannot be politically engaged, and because this work was originally published in France American women on the eve of the revolution were not his target audience, but John Dunlap’s decision to print and sell this work came at a time when women were encouraged to support America by creating homespun clothing and refusing to buy or use imported goods. Perhaps John Dunlap published *The Ladies Friend* because it demanded the “ladies in high life” to ask themselves if “they think they owe no returns for the advantages they receive” and acknowledged that “the lower class...do more than their task: but the generality...waste...time, which afterwards no sorrow can recover,” as “trifles take up all their attention.”¹⁵ This essay will not make an argument about the activities of French women, but the well-off Colonial American women in the pre-revolutionary era were highly engaged in politics in spite of the conduct books that encouraged them to stay out of men’s affairs. Upper and middle class women discussed politics with their friends and family members, published their

¹² Boudier de Villemert,” *The Ladies Friend*, 10-11.

¹³ Boudier de Villemert,” *The Ladies Friend*, 11-12.

¹⁴ Boudier de Villemert,” *The Ladies Friend*, 13.

¹⁵ Boudier de Villemert,” *The Ladies Friend*, 18, 14.

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thoughts in newspapers, organized tea parties, signed non-importation petitions, made homespun clothing, and were considered virtuous for their pro-American actions. Lower-class women, despite Boudier de Villemert's argument that they work harder, were less inclined to actively participate in politics.

Abigail Adams is one of the most studied and most written about Colonial women because hundreds of the letters she sent to her husband John Adams while he was a delegate to the Continental Congress and the following years have survived. In 1764, when she flirtatiously wrote to John, her fiancé at the time, "as a critick I fear you ...and tis the only character, in which I...ever will fear you...Do you approve of that Speach? Dont you think me a Courageous Being? Courage is a laudable, a Glorious Virtue in your Sex, why not in mine? (For my part, I think you ought to applaud me for mine)," she could not have known of the turmoil that would soon engulf America, the role her soon-to-be husband would play in it, or the hardships she would face at home.¹⁶ In the twelve years following this letter, Abigail spent long periods of time at home while John Adams was away for work, but she kept him informed of life in Boston by reporting on the actions of political leaders and occupation soldiers, the rising prices of goods, and the first battles of the war in 1775. She felt "great anxiety" for America, her husband, and her family and asked, "Did ever any Kingdom or State regain their Liberty, when once it was invaded without Blood shed?"¹⁷ She was constantly aware of the political situation and understood the implications of occupation. Her awareness however was not limited to brief observations of Boston life. She purposely provided information about the number of ships and troop movements at her husband's request to "Pray write to me, and get all my Friends to write

¹⁶ Abigail Smith to John Adams, 16 April 1764, in "Letters During Courtship and Early Legal Career, 1762-1774," *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society, 1, accessed December 1, 2020. https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/browse/letters_1762_1773.php

¹⁷ Abigail Adams to John Adams, 19 August 1774, in "Letters During Continental Congress, August 1774-1777," *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, Massachusetts Historical Society, 1, accessed December 1, 2020. https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/browse/letters_1774_1777.php

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and let me be informed of every Thing that occurs;” in June of 1775 she reported that “troops destined for Newyork are all expected here,” and in an allusion to her claim of courage stated “a whole legion of them would not intimidate us.—I think I am very brave upon the whole.”¹⁸

Abigail Adams also boycotted British goods. In one letter she remarked “you can hardly imagine how much we want many common small articles which are not manufactured amongst ourselves, but we will have them in time.”¹⁹ While many others struggled to buy what they needed as prices rose, she was able to ask John to send her goods, but she wanted to “live in the most frugal manner possible.”²⁰ As the end of 1775 drew near and battles had already been fought, Abigail broke every rule for women’s conversation and asked directly “what Code of Laws” would the new country have and “how shall we be governd?”²¹ She met with the Patriot leaders—including George Washington—kept tabs on British occupation forces in Boston, participated in non-importation, read “Common Sense,” and openly questioned the logistics of starting a new country. She was unwavering in her support for her country, but even she admitted that “to the Mercantile part,” who “have not the advantages, nor the resolution to encourage our own Manufactories,” refusing to purchase British goods was “considered as throwing away their own Bread...they must...be content with a small share of gain...few...will wear their Livery.”²² While men were able to pick a side and fight when their businesses failed, women could not, and local acts of resistance often hindered their ability to provide for their families. The customers

¹⁸ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 2 May 1775, “Letters During Continental Congress, August 1774-1777,” 1, accessed December 2, 2020; Abigail Adams to John Adams, 22 June 1775, “Letters During Continental Congress, August 1774-1777,” 2, accessed December 2, 2020.

¹⁹ Abigail Adams to John Adams, 16 July 1775,” Letters During Continental Congress, August 1774-1777,” 5, accessed December 1, 2020.

²⁰ Abigail Adams to John Adams, 16 July 1775,” Letters During Continental Congress, August 1774-1777,” 5, accessed December 1, 2020.

²¹ Abigail Adams to John Adams, 27 November 1775, “Letters During Continental Congress, August 1774-1777,” 1, accessed December 1, 2020.

²² Abigail Adams to John Adams, 16 October 1774, Letters During Continental Congress, August 1774-1777,” 2, accessed December 1, 2020.

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who frequented women's shops before non-importation refused to buy their goods; prices rose, and the working class could not support their businesses. Like Boudier argued, the lower classes did work hard, but the fashionable trend in the upper classes to create goods in the name of patriotism eliminated their source of income and prevented them from showing support for America because it was impossible for their actions to match a patriotic ideology.

After the Revolutionary War, Mercy Otis Warren wrote *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*, but she was invested in revolutionary sentiment before the war began. In nearly every letter Warren wrote from 1769-1776, she referenced politics, defying the convention of leaving worldly conversations to men. In a letter to her friend Hannah Quincy Lincoln, she argued "every mind of the least sensibility, must be greatly affected with the present distress; and even a female pen might be excused for touching on the important subject," and though "the wisest among the other sex are much divided" and it may have been "impertinent, or...sanguine" for her to broach the subject, she said what she wished.²³ By writing to her friends letters similar to this one, she encouraged them to be politically aware. In another letter to Lincoln, she warned that it was "much easier...to restore peace and order to societies and bring people back to a regular subordination than, to break the yoke of servitude when a neck has long been accustomed to wear it;" she understood that living without the British goods she and her friends were accustomed to was difficult, and it was even worse to know that their friends and family members would likely go to war for continuing to fight for their beliefs, that struggle was necessary to break free from the "yoke" of Britain's tyranny.²⁴ Warren became friends with the Adamses and wrote directly to John Adams so he could keep her informed about

²³ Mercy Otis Warren to Hannah Quincy Lincoln, 12 June 1773, in *Mercy Otis Warren, Selected Letters*, ed. Jeffrey H. Richards and Sharon M. Harris, (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2009), 29-30, eBook.

²⁴ Mercy Otis Warren to Hannah Quincy Lincoln, 3 September 1774, in *Mercy Otis Warren, Selected Letters*, 35.

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America's progress in the fight against Great Britain even though it was considered, if not inappropriate, frowned upon, for her to write to a man. She refused to let him reply only to humor her. In one letter she told him that though his "asking [her] opinion on so momentous a point as the form of *government which ought to be preferred* by a people... may be designed to ridicule the sex for paying any attention to political matters," she would "give [him] a serious reply," and then proceeded to do so. She "hope[d] never to see a Monarchy established" and had "long been an admirer of a republican government."²⁵ Warren did not just participate in local acts of rebellion but was knowledgeable about types of government and what she wanted for the burgeoning country.

Unlike Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren, Martha Washington was not a politician's wife, but as the wife of the Continental Army's Commanding General, George Washington, she was thrust into a political position as America's First Lady before that was an actual role to be filled. Her status was probably the most politicized position an American woman could hold, but she had to be the perfect virtuous woman to maintain her and her husband's reputations while in the public spotlight. In her private letters, she expressed her fear more openly than Abigail Adams, saying in one letter, "some days we have a number of cannon and shells from Boston and Bunkers Hill, but it does not seem to surprise any one but me; I confess I shudder every time I hear...a gun...but I endeavor to keep my fears to myself."²⁶ She had to remain fearless to the public, because her manners had to be spotless and George Washington's wife could not show any doubt in America's ability to defend herself. She did not fail in her task, and was described as "ready to make any sacrifice and...cheerful though I knew she was anxious...She talked like a Spartan mother to her son on going on to battle," by Continental Congress delegate Edmund

²⁵ Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, March 1776, in *Mercy Otis Warren, Selected Letters*, 69.

²⁶ Martha Washington to Elizabeth Ramsay, December 1775, in *Worthy Partner*, ed. Joseph E. Fields (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994), 164.

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Pendleton in 1774.²⁷ As war loomed, Martha too had to be brave; she had to fill the role her husband left behind at Mount Vernon, and step into the shoes of wife to the man who would lead the country to freedom; her politics could not waver. While there are fewer surviving letters of Martha's than Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren, it is clear that Martha had to have significant knowledge and understanding of politics and was personally involved in the political world as the wife of George Washington.

Abigail Adams, Mercy Otis Warren, and Martha Washington knew each other and corresponded through letters. Their husbands were directly involved in American politics. They were laudable Patriots and deserve the recognition they receive, but their lives and actions are the exception more than the rule of female patriotism because their positions in life were different than most women. Abigail Adams' husband was a delegate to the Continental Congress and signed the Declaration of Independence. Mercy Otis Warren's determination to befriend male political activists and her position as the sister of a prominent Patriot lawyer and wife of a politician who encouraged her participation in politics made her incredibly outspoken about her beliefs.²⁸ Martha Washington was America's First Lady before the position officially existed; she was a beacon of patriotic virtue. These notable women leave a lot of colonial women unrepresented. What about the views of the elderly? women from the Southern Colonies? women without connections to politicians? or the working class? They definitely do not represent Loyalist women. It is important to acknowledge that while these women were exceptional in

²⁷ Edmund Pendleton to Unknown, 1774, in *The Letters and Papers of Edmund Pendleton, 1734-1803*, ed. David John Mays, 2 vols. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1967), I:98, quoted in Mary V. Thompson, "'As if I Had Been a Very Great Somebody:' Martha Washington's Revolution," in *Women in the American Revolution: Gender, Politics, and the Domestic World*, ed. Barbara B. Oberg, 128-146 (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2019): 131.

²⁸ Jeffrey H. Richards and Sharon M. Harris ed., introduction to *Mercy Otis Warren: Selected Letters* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), xiv, xiii, eBook. https://libproxy.eku.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=nlebk&AN=310973&site=ehost-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_xii; Richards and Harris, preface to Mercy Otis Warren to James Otis Jr. September 1769, 3.

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their political actions and roles, their positions in society made their political activity reliable sources only for the beliefs and actions of women whose husbands, fathers, or brothers were politicians. They had unique insight into the governance of pre-revolutionary America and many of their beliefs were influenced by their family members' occupations. They only represent one social class of women. By examining the socioeconomic influences on women's political activism as a whole, instead of only looking at the most well-known women, the effect on women's political opinions is clear. The unrepresented women did not leave behind large collections of letters or diaries about their struggles, but the sentiments of some are discernable in indirect ways, through newspaper ads for their shops, or, in the case of the few women who worked in the printing industry, the ads and articles they agreed to publish. They could take a political stance only if their publications did not hurt their businesses.

Women had considerably fewer job opportunities than men during the Colonial Period in America. Many women opened shops where they worked as milliners or mantuamakers to create clothes with imported fabrics because maintaining London fashion was important for some higher class women to obtain an image in society equal to that of the English upper-class; the shopkeeper's ability to provide that clothing was necessary to establish a good reputation for their shops, so they placed advertisements that acknowledged their connections to London.²⁹ According to historian Kaylan Stevenson, eighteenth-century Virginia had the greatest millinery activity between 1763 and the beginning of the war, despite importation limits. Women opposed non-importation agreements more often than their male counterparts, even though boycotting British goods was the fashionable and virtuous thing for patriotic women to do.³⁰ At the Edenton

²⁹ Kaylan M. Stevenson, "'Until Liberty of Importation is Allowed': Milliners and Mantuamakers in the Chesapeake on the Eve of Revolution," in *Women in the American Revolution: Gender, Politics, and the Domestic World*, ed. Barbara B. Oberg (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2019), 40-42.

³⁰ Stevenson, "'Until Liberty of Importation is Allowed,'" 40-41.

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Tea Party of 1774, one of the most distinct examples of political activism among colonial women, ladies from wealthy and prominent families in North Carolina signed a petition to stop drinking imported tea.³¹ To these ladies, this agreement was a noble action and a sacrifice they would willingly make to support America, but the poor women whose livelihoods depended on importation must have seen non-importation as an end to their means of supporting themselves. As Patriot sentiment prevented Virginia milliners from profiting enough to survive, milliner Sarah Pitt was forced to place an ad clarifying that her “goods were sent for before” non-importation.³² As resistance and dissent became more widespread, several shop-owners, like Margret Hunter, Jane and her husband Edward Charlton, and Catherine Rathell had to leave for London, placed newspaper ads explaining that they would be selling “the Goods they have on Hand...cheap for Cash,” and demanding that “those who are indebted” pay off their accounts “as early as possible.”³³ To keep her business operating, Sarah Pitt reassured her patrons that she was not against the Patriot cause because non-importation agreements made her customer base dwindle, but buying the goods she had on hand would still support the British. This sudden loss of patronage would have caused immediate distress over finances that they associated with the Patriot cause, but whatever Pitt’s personal feelings were about the justness of the revolution, she had to express her understanding of her customers’ political stance and justify her possession of British goods. Other women, like Catherine Rathell who had emigrated to Virginia from England—before announcing that she would leave America “until liberty of importation is allowed”—believed that the revolution was unfair to the Americans trying to making a living in

³¹ Maggie Hartley Mitchell, “Treasonous Tea: The Edenton Tea Party of 1774,” in *North Carolina’s Revolutionary Founders*, ed. Jeff Broadwater and Troy L. Kickler (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2019): 25.

³² *Virginia Gazette* (Dixon and Hunter), March 4, 1775, [3], quoted in Stevenson, ““Until Liberty of Importation is Allowed,”” 54.

³³ *Virginia Gazette* (Dixon and Hunter), April 19, 1775, supp., [4], quoted in Stevenson, ““Until Liberty of Importation is Allowed,”” 54.

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one of the few ways they could.³⁴

Catherine Rathell's ad was not the only example of distress among the merchant class in response to non-importation. In 1774, "A dialogue, between a Southern Delegate, and his Spouse on his Return from the Grand Continental Congress" was published in New York and dedicated "To the Married Ladies of *America*," but the Wife's lines read more like the words of a frustrated female merchant than the counsel of a politician's wife, such as Abigail Adams or Mercy Otis Warren.³⁵ In the dialogue, the husband took on the traditional role of reproaching his wife for daring to speak about politics, telling her "'Tis really indecent to be in such Passion; / Mind thy Household-Affairs, teach thy Children to read, / And never, Dear, with Politics, trouble thy Head."³⁶ The wife did not take this chastisement lightly, mocking her husband's, and indeed all men's ability to make decisions; "Because Men are Males, are they all Politicians?" she asked, questioning why being male is the only qualification needed for the job before angrily ranting, "Why then I presume they're Divines and Physicians, / And born all with Talents every Station to fill, / Noble proofs you've given! no doubt, of your Skill."³⁷ Then she boldly stated what she believed would fix the problems in America: "Wou'd! instead of Delegates, they'd sent Delegates Wives; / Heavens! We cou'dn't have bungled it so for our Lives!"³⁸ The husband continued to mock her, refused to take her seriously, and told her that since she was "so patient, so cool, so monstrous eloquent, / Next Congress, my Empress, shalt be made President," but the

³⁴ *Virginia Gazette* (Pinkney), April 20, 1775, [3], quoted in Stevenson, "'Until Liberty of Importation is Allowed,'" 54; Stevenson, "'Until Liberty of Importation is Allowed,'" 39.

³⁵ Mary V. V., "A Dialogue Between a Southern Delegate and his Spouse, on his Return from the Grand Continental Congress," (New York, 1774), title page, *America's Historical Imprints*, Early American Imprints, Series 1, no. 13245.

³⁶ Mary V. V., "A Dialogue Between a Southern Delegate and his Spouse, on his Return from the Grand Continental Congress," 7.

³⁷ Mary V. V., "A Dialogue Between a Southern Delegate and his Spouse, on his Return from the Grand Continental Congress," 7.

³⁸ Mary V. V., "A Dialogue Between a Southern Delegate and his Spouse, on his Return from the Grand Continental Congress," 8.

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wife became so aggravated at his ridicule for her anger at the political situation that she hardly let him speak for the rest of the dialogue.³⁹ She was afraid that her husband might go to prison for committing treason by attending the congress but she was more frustrated by the decisions the delegates made.⁴⁰ She condemned them for acting “like a sovereign Pow’r” when they were only supposed to “lay...our complaints, before Parliament,” and was upset because “Your Non-Imports, and exports, are full fraught with Ruin, / Of thousands, and thousands, the utter Undoing,” since they’ve “contriv’d to starve, all the poor People to death.”⁴¹ This does not sound like the angry retort of an upper/middle class Patriot politician’s wife whose political identity revolved around making sacrifices and being industrious in support of her country. The wife’s arguments more closely match the sentiments of milliners and mantuamakers who could not run their businesses because of importation restrictions. The author of this dialogue is known only as Mary V. V., but if she was a merchant and not a politician’s wife, she would have understood the associations between public political activity and virtue and known that the sentiments of a politician’s wife (especially one whose husband attended the Continental Congress) would be far better received than those of a lowly merchant. Female members of the lower class who believed supporting the Patriots meant losing their ability to live likely would have desired an easy and quick settlement of the disagreements with Parliament so they could once again support their families.

Before non-importation, lower class women were already making homespun clothing to wear—because they could not afford imported English clothes—and to sell, but as non-importation agreements were passed by local governments and petitions were signed by

³⁹ Mary V. V., “A Dialogue Between a Southern Delegate and his Spouse, on his Return from the Grand Continental Congress,” 8.

⁴⁰ Mary V. V., “A Dialogue Between a Southern Delegate and his Spouse, on his Return from the Grand Continental Congress,” 9-10.

⁴¹ Mary V. V., “A Dialogue Between a Southern Delegate and his Spouse, on his Return from the Grand Continental Congress,” 10-11.

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fashionable ladies, upper class women's virtue became associated with creating homespun goods.⁴² Only a year after the Stamp Act prompted boycotts, papers had made the association between industry and the biblical value of virtue—"a virtuous Woman:--She seeketh Wool and Flax, &c.—she layeth her Hands to Spindle, and her Hands hold the Distaff.—Her price is far above Rubies"⁴³—but even Jane Franklin Mecom, Benjamin Franklin's sister, attempted to open her own millinery shop to support herself in the pre-revolutionary period.⁴³ She was the exception to the rule however, perhaps because she only opened her business to support herself as a widow, her love for her brother and the close connection to his politics, or her age and life experience, but she strongly supported the Patriots. She spoke of her political thoughts, not just with Benjamin Franklin, but with her local pastor and possibly other members of her community.⁴⁴ Jane Franklin Mecom is a rare example of a poor woman who, though unable to run her business because of politics, did not let the failure of her shop affect her political beliefs. For most female business owners, non-importation's effect on their livelihoods directly influenced their politics.

Women who held jobs that were not entirely dependent on British imports were freer to express their political opinions. Women who worked in taverns or boardinghouses had greater freedom to share their personal beliefs (as long as the majority in their communities agreed with them) because their occupations were less affected by non-importation.⁴⁵ Unlike these women, however, women connected to the publishing/printing industry, a typically male profession, had the unique ability to influence the type of propaganda presented to the public, even though they

⁴² Danielle Skeehan, "Texts and Textiles: Commercial Poetics and Material Economies in the Early Atlantic," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 36, no. 4 (2016): 691.

⁴³ Account printed in *The Newport Mercury*, Newport, RI, May 5-12, 1776; Issue 401, 3. Scan of page in Skeehan, "Texts and Textiles," 695; Jeremy A. Stern, "Jane Franklin Mecom: A Boston Woman in Revolutionary Times," *Early American Studies* 4, no. 1 (2006): 162, 174.

⁴⁴ Stern, "Jane Franklin Mecom," 147-148, 162, 172, 174.

⁴⁵ Stevenson, "'Until Liberty of Importation is Allowed,'" 40.

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were influenced by the needs or wishes of the local community and government. In Martha J. King's essay, "Clementina Rind: Widowed Printer of Williamsburg," she discusses a woman who ran her husband's printing businesses after his death to support her family. While Clementina Rind was the editor of the *Virginia Gazette*, the Virginia House of Burgesses selected her to be the official printer for the colony.⁴⁶ She tried to support other women who were struggling to maintain their businesses during non-importation, including Catherine Rathell and Jane Charlton, but the newspaper also became much more patriotic during her stint as editor, even though her goal had been to maintain her late husband's reputation as a free publisher.⁴⁷ She felt that "the liberties of the colonies" were "daringly infringed," encouraged women to boycott imported goods, and believed "the firm, animated, and patriotic conduct, of all the colonies, must be agreeable to every native of this country, and all others who wish well to the rights and liberties of america," denying the sentiments of many of the struggling female merchants she promoted.⁴⁸ In addition to her decision to publish pro-Patriot ads and articles, she printed Thomas Jefferson's pamphlet *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*.⁴⁹ Could this dramatic shift have simply been an expression of her personal political beliefs that she now had the security to express more freely, or was she influenced by a need to maintain the patronage of the Virginia House of Burgesses through support of the American cause? Could it be both? Either way, as a printer, she had to express the sentiments of the majority or face the loss of her business, which was much easier to achieve in her profession because she controlled everything she produced,

⁴⁶ Martha J. King, "Clementina Rind: Widowed Printer of Williamsburg," in *Virginia Women: Their Lives and Times*, ed. Cynthia A. Kerner and Sandra Gioia Treadway, 74-94, (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 84.

⁴⁷ King, "Clementina Rind," 85, 88.

⁴⁸ [?] Quoted in King, "Clementina Rind," 88.

⁴⁹ Thomas Jefferson, "A Summary View of the Rights of British America," title page. Scan of page in King, "Clementina Rind," 77.

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unlike milliners and mantuamakers who had built their reputations on their ability to reproduce London fashion.

It is clear from the number of letters and publications written by women that gender roles, while playing a part in how outspoken women were about their opinions on politics, did little to inhibit their actual political activism. Socio-economic status had a much greater effect on women's sentiments and ability to support the Patriots or the Loyalists. Politician's wives kept their husband's informed of the unrest in their hometowns while they were away and participated in local acts of protest. Upper-class women also encouraged Patriotism by signing petitions agreeing to boycott imported goods and creating their own homespun yarn and clothing so that they did not have to rely on imports. These agreements placed women who owned clothing shops in an awkward position because they needed foreign goods to run their stores but refusing to support the Patriot cause by importing meant losing customers. Women who worked in the printing industry had the unique opportunity to be outspoken, but what they published was directly influenced by their community's sentiment. As women's livelihoods became more secure and their socio-economic status rose, their ability to participate in politics with impunity also rose. It is important to recognize this trend because it challenges both the gender expectations of the time period, which have historically created biased interpretations of female participation in history (or the supposed lack of it), by acknowledging that women were politically active and shows that political thought was diverse but influenced primarily by individuals' situations in life. Women did not blindly follow their husband's lead and support the side he decided was correct but based their politics on what would allow them to support themselves and their families. They had to be careful who and what they supported or risk the loss of their livelihoods.

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