

What the U.S. Constitution Means to Me

Personally, the Constitution displays the foundation our country built to sustain equality. Throughout the last 236 years, we have improved upon these principles and we can continue to progress in this area. As an anonymous “lady from Philadelphia” wrote to a British officer, “No man has a right to take their money without their consent. You say you are no politician. Oh, sir, it requires no Machivellian head to develop this, and to discover this tyranny and oppression. It is written with a sun beam.”¹ She is a perfect example of the enthusiasm with which women of the time thought of politics, and the mindset I have on the Constitution: that *all* have contributed to the progress and growth of our country.

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”² The usage of the word Tranquility in the preamble is an interesting one because the time in our country since has been anything but. The Constitution is one of the three documents that America is built on, and the war that preceded it was supported by thousands of *women*. The efforts of many colonial women, young women, and girls were the very impetus for the pace and prominence of America's independence. Without these female patriots and their passion for the causes of justice and freedom, the Constitutional rights written in 1787 may have never been a possibility, let alone a published document.

In the prelude events to the Revolutionary War, restricted from trading with England, women of colonial America were left with two options: make the goods themselves or learn to live without them. Many women, choosing the first option, held spinning events at their pastor's homes, rightfully earning the nickname, Spinning Bees. This moniker was used to promote creating commodities rather than importing them, and to show that women were capable of patriotism without abandoning traditional concepts of femininity. Besides textiles, other goods were forsaken, and women chose to write about their rebellion against luxurious European life,

"Let the Daughters of Liberty, nobly arise,
and tho' we've no Voice, but a negative here,
The use of the Taxables, let us forbear...
Stand firmly resolved and bid Grenville to see
That rather than Freedom, we'll part with our Tea."³

When talking about the Revolutionary War, the insurrection of British tea often comes up. When the importation of it came to the forefront of political issues around 1773, William Tennent III advertised to colonial women in the South Carolina Gazette that abstaining from drinking it would show the British, "that American patriotism extends even to the Fair Sex. Yes Ladies, You have it in your power more than all your committees and Congresses, to Strike the Stroke, and make the Hills and Plains of America clap their hands."⁴ What it would have been like, as someone who previously could have had no lasting effect on your country, to be told that you can make its "Hills and Plains clap their hands." The political momentum of women grew immensely with this statement in the Gazette.

¹ Commanger, Henry S., and Richard B. Morris. *The Spirit of 'Seventy-Six: The Story of the American Revolution As Told by the Participants*. 1958. p. 95.

² "The Constitution of the United States: A Transcription." *The National Archives*, 15 Aug. 2023, www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript. Accessed 30 Aug. 2023.

³ Quarterly, William, and Mary Quarterly. *Patriotic Poesy*. series 3, 1768. p. 34.

⁴ Norton, Mary B. *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800*. Cornell University Press, 1996. p. 159.

While some may argue that, “Along with equality, freedom, and justice, prejudice, racism, and sexism are among our oldest values,”⁵ there are many examples where diversity, equity, and inclusion were present from the beginning. I believe that the contributions of colonial women carry into our modern American lifestyles. A book titled, *A People's History of the American Revolution* by Ray Raphael states, "Suddenly entering the political domain, women displayed the zeal and zest of the newly converted...Never were greater politicians than the several knots of ladies."⁶⁷ This statement holds true today.

Furthermore, A teenage girl from New York, Charity Clark wrote to a cousin in England that although, "Heroines may not distinguish themselves at the head of the army," the colonial women were, "a fighting army of amazones...armed with spinning wheels. Though this body is not clad with silken garments, these limbs are armed with strength...and the Love of Liberty is cherished within this bosom."⁸ Clark exemplifies the national spirit that many women of the time possessed. As a young woman myself, Charity is a heroine to me of what it means to be a patriot. Though their patriotism may have been great, the reward for their efforts was no political voice once again when in 1807 women lost their right to vote.

“Women voted in Revolutionary America, over a hundred years before the United States Constitution guaranteed that right to women nationally. The 1776 New Jersey State Constitution referred to voters as ‘they,’ and statutes passed in 1790 and 1797 defined voters as ‘he or she.’ This lasted until 1807 when a new state law said only white men could vote.”⁹

The loss of this right was devastating, considering the passion with which women spoke of their new voice in the political arena. As Isabella Beecher Hooker wrote in 1883, "First...women have a right to vote to-day, on precisely the same terms with men; and secondly, that men ought to help them to do so by every means in their power."¹⁰ This interpretation was confusing considering the verbiage used such as, “*We the People*,” the first line in the Constitution. Not only were women originally allowed to vote, an additional law was implemented to forbid them to do so.

To conclude, the Revolutionary War left a revolutionary mark on women's self-judgements and personal ambitions. While its interpretation may have set women back, the Constitution outlines the rights that *all* people hold in our nation. When we celebrate the Constitution this month, by recognizing and celebrating the women who worked tirelessly to get us to a Constitutional America, we are forming a more perfect Union. “*It is written with a sun beam.*”¹¹

⁵ Healey, Joseph F., and Andi Stepnick. *Diversity & Society: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender*. 5th ed., Sage Publications, 2017. p. XVII.

⁶ Gillman, Caroline. "Letters of Eliza Wilkinson During the Invasion and Possession of Charleston, S.C." *Eliza Wilkinson's Letters*, 1839, pp. 17, 61, 66. Accessed 21 Jul. 2023.

⁷ Raphael, Ray. *A People's History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence*. Edited by Howard Zinn, *The New Press*, 2001. p. 114.

⁸ Norton, Mary B. *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800*. Cornell University Press, 1996. p. 169.

⁹ When Women Lost the Vote. Museum of the American Revolution, 5 Aug. 2018, www.amrevmuseum.org/virtualexhibits/when-women-lost-the-vote-a-revolutionary-story. Accessed 10 Sept. 2023.

¹⁰ Hooker, Isabella B. "The Constitutional Rights Of The Women Of The United States." *Archives of Women's Political Communication*, 30 Mar. 1883, awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/21/the-constitutional-rights-of-the-women-of-the-united-states-march-30-1883/.

¹¹ Commager, Henry S., and Richard B. Morris. *The Spirit of 'Seventy-Six: The Story of the American Revolution As Told by the Participants*. 1958. p. 95.