



Women's Roles and Rights in British North America

The purpose of this unit is to introduce students to the lives of women in British North America, exploring gender roles and the rights women possessed (and lacked) before the Revolutionary War. This unit will engage students in questioning popular assumptions about the lives of women by examining the roles women had in diverse communities throughout British North America.

MATERIALS

When Women Lost the Vote Sources

BIG IDEA 1: Women's Roles and Rights in Colonial America

ONLINE EXHIBIT: *When Women Lost the Vote: A Revolutionary Story, 1776-1807* (Museum of the American Revolution)

<https://www.amrevmuseum.org/virtualexhibits/when-women-lost-the-vote-a-revolutionary-story>

ONLINE EXHIBIT: *When Women Lost the Vote: A Revolutionary Story, 1776-1807, Part 1: How did Women Gain the Vote?* (Museum of the American Revolution)

<https://www.amrevmuseum.org/virtualexhibits/when-women-lost-the-vote-a-revolutionary-story/pages/how-did-women-gain-the-vote-the-promise-of-1776-for-women>

Primary Sources

WATERCOLOR: *An Overseer Doing His Duty Near Fredericksburg, Virginia* by Benjamin Latrobe, 1793

(Maryland Center for History and Culture)

<https://www.mdhistory.org/resources/an-overseer-doing-his-duty-near-fredericksburg-virginia/>

ART SET: *A Transformed Generation of Women?*

(Museum of the American Revolution)

<https://www.amrevmuseum.org/virtualexhibits/when-women-lost-the-vote-a-revolutionary-story/pages/a-transformed-generation-of-women>

OBJECT SET: These objects may have been prepared for a woman's dowry

<https://www.amrevmuseum.org/virtualexhibits/when-women-lost-the-vote-a-revolutionary-story/pages/these-objects-may-have-been-prepared-for-a-woman-s-dowry>

OBJECT SET: These objects may have been stored in dowry furniture, like chests or dressers

<https://www.amrevmuseum.org/virtualexhibits/when-women-lost-the-vote-a-revolutionary-story/pages/these-objects-may-have-been-stored-in-dowry-furniture-like-chests-or-dressers>

Other Resources

VIDEO: Haudenosaunee | Women and Governance

(WNED PBS, Discovering New York Suffrage Stories)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAcAlqsRANO>

VIDEO: Object Highlights: Elizabeth "Betty" Dorn's Short Gown

(Museum of the American Revolution)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6KFrAAWCMk>

WORKSHEET: Location and Life

AIMS and OBJECTIVES

The modular activities and extensions in this unit provide opportunities for students to:

- Explore the roles that were expected of women in British North America.
- Understand what rights women generally possessed or were denied in the British American colonies.
- Examine how geography, economics, religion, and status of freedom affected the daily lives of women in British North America.
- Compare and contrast life for women in British North America and life for women in the United States today or their own lives.

PROCEDURES

Engagement Activities

These activities can be used as hook activities, introductions to concepts, or shorter lessons.

DIFFERENT DAYS

Objective: Examine how geography, economics, religion, and status of freedom affected the daily lives of women in British North America.

Time: 10 minutes

Ask students to consider if they and a classmate will have the same exact day today. Remind them to consider what classes and teachers they have, what they do when they get home, what they'll eat today, what they'll do after school, and so on. What are some differences between them?

Then ask them to consider why everyone in the world has a life that is different from the next person. Write a list of the reasons on the board.

Afterward, encourage students to think about life in British North America and engage students in conversation around the following questions:

- What were some areas that colonists lived in? What are some differences between those areas?
- Do any of the reasons we've listed on the board apply to the colonists as well?
- You go to school everyday. Do you think colonists did the same? What might be included in their lives?
- What might some differences in their day to day life be if they were a man or a woman?
- Return back to the idea of location. How might where they live influence what a colonist's life looked like?

EXTEND: Have the students read Big Idea 1 to see how women in British North America led different lives depending on different factors.

Development Activities

These activities can be used for an entire class period.

ALL THE SINGLE LADIES

Objective: Understand what rights women generally possessed or were denied in the British American colonies.

Time: 30-35 minutes

Teacher Preparation: Review *Big Idea 1: Women's Roles and Rights in British North America*. Print enough copies of *Big Idea 1* or ensure students have access to computers, tablets, or other devices with working internet connections to access it online.

Discuss the following with your students:

In 2020, the U.S. government conducted a census, or survey, of the country's population. It found that almost half of U.S. adults are single. Why might people choose to remain single today? Are there any advantages to this status? Disadvantages?

Have students read the section of Big Idea 1 on Women's Rights in British North America. Afterwards, engage students in a discussion around the following questions:

- What rights did single women in colonial America have? What rights were they deprived of?
This can be found in Women's Rights in British North America.
- Do you think it was difficult for a woman to remain single either from an economic or social standpoint? What evidence from the text supports your answer?

Student answers may vary.

Share the following quote with students:

"I've neither reserve nor aversion to man...But to keep my dear Liberty, long as I can, Is the reason I chuse to live single." Hannah

Griffitts, a Philadelphia Quaker, 1769

Teacher note: *Hannah Griffitts grew up well-educated in a wealthy Quaker family who were also heavily involved in Philadelphia politics. Prior to the war, she wrote poetry encouraging women to exercise political agency through the Stamp Act boycotts. Her poetry during the Revolutionary War era criticized both sides of the war, which she thought led to division within communities and families.*

Engage students in a conversation around the following questions:

- What do you think Hannah Griffitts meant by this statement?
- Review with students the background of Hannah Griffitts.
- How might Griffitts background have impacted her opinion?
- Do you think many women felt this way in 1769? Why or why not?
- What might have been the negative consequences of Hannah Griffitts' decision to remain single? Would there have been any benefits?

Assign students to create two Venn Diagrams. The first should compare the positives of being single in the present vs in the colonial era. The second should compare the negatives. Afterwards, discuss with students their findings.

EXTEND: Have the students debate the topic with one side for being single in the colonial period and one side being against it.

CLOTHING COMPARISON

Objective: Explore the roles that were expected of women in British North America.

Time: 20-30 minutes

Teacher Preparation: In [Part 1: How did Women Gain the Vote?](#), navigate to the section *Slavery and Freedom for New Jersey Women* until you reach the dresses of Elizabeth Dorn and Joan Sloan LeConte. Prepare to show the [video](#) of Betty Dorn's shortgown, which can also be found beneath the dresses on the page.

Have the students examine Betty Dorn's short gown in the *Slavery and Freedom for New Jersey Women* section. Then have them watch the video of Betty Dorn's short gown.

After students have examined the short gown, have them view the other two objects associated with Betty Dorn. Ask students what these objects can tell us about the life of Betty Dorn. Then display or project Joan Sloan LeConte's gown and ask: from examining the gown, what can this tell us about the life of Joan Sloan Le Conte?

Have students brainstorm how the two women's lives would have been different or similar. Then review the following descriptions from the *When Women Lost the Vote* virtual exhibit:

Elizabeth "Betty" Dorn of Shrewsbury, Monmouth County, NJ was born in 1760, when nearly all New Jersey people of African descent were enslaved. Though it is unclear if she was born enslaved or free, it is known that Dorn was a free woman later in life. Historians know that Dorn worked as a servant

to the Hartshorne family in Monmouth County, and that she owned property including the armchair, pencil sketch, and short gown in this collection. If she owned enough property at any point between 1776 and 1807, she may have voted.

Jane Sloan LeConte also lived in Shrewsbury, Monmouth County, NJ as a “genteel” woman. Historians know that she married John Eatton LeConte, Sr. in 1776, probably about the time she wore this dress. Though not much is known about the couple, two of the LeConte children bought a plantation in Georgia after the Revolution. By the 1800s, they ran the Woodmanston plantation and benefitted from the labor of many enslaved people.

Ask the students if their predictions matched up with what is known about both women. Conclude by asking students what historians in the future might learn about society today through fashion.

EXTEND: Compare the five images found on the *When Women Lost the Vote* virtual exhibit section entitled [A Transformed Generation of Women?](#)

NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN LEADERS Research Activity
Objective: Explore the roles that were expected of *Indigenous* women within their own communities in British North America.
Time: 1-2 days (50 minute classes)

Teacher Preparation: Review *Big Idea 1: Women’s Roles and Rights in British North America*. Print enough copies of *Big Idea 1* (or only the section on *Native American Identity*) for all students and [Tyonajane-gen’s biography](#) or ensure students have access to computers, tablets, or other devices with working internet connections. Prepare to display video [“Haudenosaunee | Women and Governance”](#) and the painting *The Oneida at the Battle of Oriskany*.

Instructions for locating the paintings: Access the [virtual tour](#) of Liberty: Don Troiani’s Paintings of the Revolutionary War. In the menu, choose 6 - Oriskany. *The Oneida at the Battle of Oriskany* will be directly in front.

Review the section on Native American Identity within *Big Idea 1: Women’s Roles and Rights in British North America* as a class. Then, together as a class watch the video “Haudenosaunee | Women and Governance” and discuss the role of women in the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy).

Have the students examine the painting *The Oneida at the Battle of Oriskany* by Don Troiani in the online exhibit *Liberty*. What do they notice about the woman in the painting?

Tell the students that this painting depicts Tyonajanegen (also known as Two Kettles Together) aiding her husband at the Battle of Oriskany, and review her biography with the students using the virtual exhibit of the Oneida Nation Theater.

Have students research Tyonajanegen (also known as Two Kettles Together) of the Oneida Nation and Molly Brant of the Mohawk Nation. Explain to the students that these two women were allied with opposite sides of the war. Have the students use the following questions to guide their research:

- What roles did they play within their communities and in their communities’ decisions on which side to support in the Revolutionary War?
- How were they similar to and different from each other?

Come together as a class to discuss the students’ findings.

INDENTURED SERVANT DISCOVERY

Objective: Examine how geography, economics, religion, and status of freedom affected the daily lives of women in British North America.

Time: 40-50 minutes

In small groups or individually, have students research indentured servitude in British North America over the course of its existence. Have them focus on the following questions:

- Why did people choose to come?
- Did every indentured servant have a choice?
- How common was it for women to be indentured servants?
- Were there laws about indentured servitude that specifically focused on women?

Then have students create a pro/con list for a European woman who is considering coming to the colonies as an indentured servant.

Culmination Activities, Research Projects, and Group Projects

LOCATION AND LIFE Research Activity

Objective: Examine how geography, economics, religion, and status of freedom affected the daily lives of women in British North America.

Time: 2-3 days (50 minute classes)

Teacher Preparation: Review *Big Idea 1: Women’s Roles and Rights in British North America*. Print enough copies of *Big Idea 1* for all students or ensure students have access to computers, tablets, or other devices with working internet connections. Create a list of various locations throughout the thirteen colonies of British North America and put each one on a separate sheet of paper in a hat or other container. Prepare copies of the *Location and Life* worksheet for all students.

Have the students read *Big Idea 1*. After students have finished reading, engage them in a discussion using the following questions:

- How did the location in which a woman lived play a part in her daily life in colonial America?
- What other things may play a part in a woman’s daily life in colonial America?

Students will choose two locations out of the hat or location to research and complete the worksheet *Location and Life*. You may want the students to choose both at once or have them pick the second location after they’ve finished the first. Make sure the

second location is in a different region (New England, Middle, Southern colonies) from their first location.

Once the students have their locations, give them time in class or assign homework to research the daily life for a woman living in their location. Have students consider the following factors: geography, weather, economic opportunities, education, language, clothing styles, pastimes, food, and activities that were popular in their location around the time of the Revolutionary War.

Have students present their findings to the class. Once everyone has presented their findings, discuss the following questions:

- What were some common influences throughout the different locations and colonies? What areas were more similar than others?
- What were some of the major differences between the different locations? Why do you think that is?

Conclude with a class discussion of how important location is to a person's daily life both during the Revolutionary War era and today. Discuss or have the students think about the question: How does the place in which we live play a part in our daily lives today?

EXTEND: Have students complete the same table from the worksheet using their own life and potential opportunities to complete each category. Student answers will vary, but remind them to think about details of their lives. Then have them fill out a second column with information from another location around the world.

COVERTURE LAW PERSPECTIVES

Objective: Understand what rights women generally possessed or were denied in the British American colonies. Examine how geography, economics, religion, and status of freedom affected the daily lives of women in British North America.

Time: 2 days (50 minute classes)

Teacher Preparation: Review *Big Idea 1: Women's Roles and Rights in British North America*. Ensure students have access to computers, tablets, or other devices with working internet connections to read *Big Idea 1* or print out enough copies for each student.

After students have read *Big Idea 1*, ask them if they think we understand and react to laws from the 17th century the way that people living in the 17th century did?

Explain to students that laws that were followed in the 1700s are often hard to understand today both due to changes in our language and culture. Have a conversation with students around the following questions:

- What are your thoughts about coverture laws as you look at these laws today?
- Why do you feel these laws weren't challenged more by people in British North America? Remember there were some groups, like the Quakers, who had a more flexible view on coverture.

- How did these laws impact the lives of women in British North America?
- Were there any benefits for women as a result of coverture laws?
- What women's rights have women advocated for since the colonial era?

Think about the perspectives of the women during the revolution. Have the students choose (or assign) one of the perspectives below and make an argument from that point of view using research. Use the question "what are the factors that might influence your perspective on coverture" as a guide.

Then, find a classmate with a different perspective and do a comparison between the two. What are some similarities between the two perspectives? What are some differences? Do there seem to be common factors that play a role in both?

Perspectives:

- Scots-Irish woman from Appalachian backcountry
- Quaker woman from Philadelphia
- French Huguenot woman from Rhode Island
- Free woman of African descent in New Jersey
- Indentured servant living in Maryland
- German woman living in Pennsylvania
- Anglican woman from a slaveholding family in South Carolina
- Widowed tavern owner in Boston
- Dutch woman from the Hudson Valley
- Jewish woman living in New York City

EXTEND: Have the students create a journal entry, newspaper opinion piece, poem, oral speech, or other creative work from the point of view of their chosen perspective.

Extension Activities

A WOMAN'S DOWRY

Objective: Explore the roles that were expected of women in British North America.

Time: 10-15 minutes

Teacher Preparation: Prepare to project, or have the students access, the two object sets from the *When Women Lost the Vote* online exhibit and review the objects descriptions.

Explain to students that when an English colonial woman married in the 1600s and most of the 1700s it was customary for her family to give her a dowry to bring with her into married life. A dowry was an amount of money, movable property, goods, or sometimes real estate provided by a woman's family. Explain that this practice could serve different purposes depending on the family and marriage.

Using the collections below, have students examine the objects that were given as part of a dowry.

Object Set: [These objects may have been prepared for a woman's dowry](#)

Object Set: [These objects may have been stored in dowry furniture, like chests or dressers](#)

Engage students in conversation around the following questions:

- What possible purpose does a dowry serve?
Dowries were sometimes a woman's inheritance from her family; could help provide financial support to the woman and her new family, especially in the case of widowhood; acted as incentive for a groom to commit to the marriage; gave the woman things to bring into her new household; etc. A dowry's purpose could also vary by culture. Spanish colonial women tended to have more legal control over their dowry than English colonial women.
- What might these objects say about these women's role in their marriages?
These specific objects seem to point more toward a woman whose role involved the home and the household.
- How has the practice of gift-giving around weddings changed?
Student answers may vary. Some possible answers could include: both members of the couple receive gifts, a couple might bring their own furniture into the marriage, a couple might only receive money instead of objects, a couple could receive gifts from people other than their family, etc. Some students might make a connection between a dowry and bridal showers.
- Looking at these objects, do any of them seem similar to what might be given today? Have there been any changes?
Student answers may vary.
- Why do you think these objects were given as a dowry? Why would similar objects be given today?
Student answers may vary.

WORK & FUN: WHO DOES WHAT, PAST & PRESENT?

Objective: Compare and contrast life for women in British North America and life for women in their own lives.

Time: 15-20 minutes

Teacher Preparation: Review *Big Idea 1: Women's Roles & Rights in British North America*.

Ask students to make a list of their daily activities from morning until they go to sleep. Tell them to include all the chores they have at home. Then have a conversation around the following questions:

- What chores do you do? If you have siblings, what chores are they responsible for?
- Is there a reason the chores are divided that way (age, interests, gender, etc.)?
- What about fun things? What do you do for fun?
- Do you think gendered expectations in society influence either of these? What makes you say that?

Have the students compare their activities and chores with those from people their age in the British colonies, how are they different? How are they similar? Then ask them, what are some specific activities and chores women and girls did in the 18th century? Do you think gendered expectations in society influence either of these? What makes you say that?

ENSLAVED WOMEN IN VIRGINIA

Objective: Explore roles that were expected of enslaved women in British North America.

Time: 5-10 minutes

Teacher Preparation: Review the section *Status of Freedom under What else Shaped Women's Roles across the Colonies?* in *Big Idea 1. Prepare to project or display the Watercolor: [An Overseer Doing His Duty Near Fredericksburg, Virginia](#) by Benjamin Latrobe, 1793*

Have students examine the watercolor sketch and ask them what they see. Engage students in examining, reflecting on, and questioning the image with the following questions as a guide.

- What does the title tell you about the image? If needed, what is an overseer?
- What does the title and image reveal about the power dynamic between the people shown?
It shows that the man standing on the stump has power over the two women working.
- What does the image reveal about the working lives of these enslaved women? What other jobs might an enslaved woman have? What are the different sorts of challenges that came with each?
Go into the types of challenges that might have been present in both the fields and the household work. Student answers may vary. Some challenges may have been the intense labor in the fields, while in the household enslaved women were constantly under the eyes of their enslaver.
- What part of their lives are not told in the painting?
Answers may include topics related to family, community, religious life, etc.
- When not working, what might some of their priorities be?
Some answers could include topics like:
 - Family - worrying about not only raising children but also the fear of them being taken away
 - Community - some enslaved women were midwives and healers
 - Building meaningful lives in spite of the harsh conditions of slavery

Explain to students that a woman who was enslaved may work in the fields like the women in the painting, or they may work in the house. It also depended on where she lived. Then discuss with the students the challenges enslaved women encountered and the lives they built for themselves using the information from *Big Idea 1*.

