

## Women's Roles and Rights in British North America

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A diverse population lived in British North America before the Revolutionary War. In 1763, after victory in the French and Indian War, Britain expanded its empire in North America. It now included a vast land populated by Native Americans, British, German, Dutch, French, Scots-Irish, Swedish, and other Europeans, and people of African descent, both free and enslaved. In some places, these people mixed their cultures and “in others, their cultural practices stayed separate.

### EXPECTED ROLES FOR WOMEN

Before the Revolutionary War, most people in colonial America worked and lived on farms in family units. Typically in European colonial households men were the heads of their households, decision-makers within their religious communities, participants in politics and elections, and leaders of their governments. For free women, marriage and family were often considered to be the most important areas of their lives. Religious teachings, songs, and publications celebrated the role of the obedient daughter and wife who centered her life on the home.

Most free women married by their early twenties and were expected to bear and raise multiple children. They were taught household management from an early age, including practical skills like growing, preparing, and preserving food, mending and washing clothing, and shopping for necessities they could not produce. They often received religious instruction, including the directive to obey their fathers and, later, husbands. They might also receive some academic instruction in the basics of reading, writing, and mathematics to better run their households.

### WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN BRITISH NORTH AMERICA

While residents of British North America were from diverse backgrounds and nations, the largest single nation of origin was England. As part of the British Empire, the English colonists generally operated under **English common law**, an unwritten set of laws based on court decisions and customs that developed slowly over time. Among these laws was that of **coverture**. It was taken from the French word for “covered” and meant that when a woman married, she became covered by her husband’s identity — legally, economically, and politically. She became a “femme covert,” or “covered woman.” As a married woman, she no longer legally existed as an independent person. This meant that she could not own land or other property, sign legal documents, enter into contracts, keep her own wages, or vote.

However, not all women in colonial America were wives and mothers. Women remained, or became, single for a variety of reasons. A woman might choose to devote herself to religion instead of to a spouse, might not find a suitable partner she wanted to marry, or might not have wanted to marry in the first place. In these cases, she was considered a “femme sole,” or “woman alone.” This unmarried status could provide some freedom from both the legal rules and cultural roles that otherwise structured women’s lives in British North America. These women possessed the same legal status as men, enabling them to serve as the heads of their households, own their own businesses or property, and pay taxes. But even with this status, women could not vote (apart from very rare cases), hold political office, serve as religious leaders, or legally serve as soldiers. They were often mocked for their decision not to marry.

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*“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

Many married women outlived their husbands and became **widows**. Some never remarried. When a husband died, a widow was entitled to regain her **dowry** (an amount of property or money she or her family brought into the marriage), if she and her husband had agreed upon that. She was also entitled to a legal portion of her husband’s **estate**, usually one third. Though the law of “dower thirds” was designed to support women financially through widowhood, it also designated them as legal owners of their husbands’ property. Therefore, widows could, and often did, hold political and social power because of their control of property. If a widow remarried, however, that property returned to their former husband’s estate. Some women refused to remarry for that very reason.

## REGION AND ROLES

Where a woman lived could play a significant part in shaping her community’s expectations of her. A region’s most popular or powerful religions, the cultures of the people living there, and even the ratio of men to women in a specific area could impact a woman’s opportunities in life.

English settlers started arriving in the southern colonies in the early 1600s. The majority of these early immigrants were young men. Because men outnumbered women, a woman (and her parents) had more options to choose from when it came time to marry. Women often outlived their husbands and became widows. As widows, they became responsible for managing property. This gave them a measure of economic and political power and was an important way for southern women to regain and maintain their independence. In the decades before the Revolutionary War, more women arrived and were born. This evened out the gender imbalance and women lost some of their earlier independence and power.

The ratio of men to women was not the defining factor for women’s experiences in the Middle Colonies; religious and ethnic diversity was. Thousands of **Quakers** lived in New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey. Quaker beliefs emphasized the importance of an individual’s relationship with God and did not put men in charge of women’s spiritual development. Women were more likely to become involved in the education of their children and also to take responsibility for upholding family values within the Quaker community. They could even be leaders within the Quaker church. Dutch and Swedish communities, which were well-represented in the Mid-Atlantic, tended to allow for more property ownership by their women, which in turn gave women a greater say in their communities. This meant that Dutch and Swedish women, like Quaker women, were more able to shape their lives and their communities.

The Mid-Atlantic also had several large and bustling towns, like Philadelphia and New York City, which offered spaces for diverse cultures to mix and provided more opportunities for paid work for women. Widows sometimes inherited businesses like bookbinderies or print shops. Other women worked as teachers, seamstresses, tavern keepers, cooks, domestic servants, and more and were able to earn and keep money for themselves.

### DID YOU KNOW?

In one area of Philadelphia, 21% of the households were led by unmarried women. One woman, Rachel Draper, owned a small tavern after her husband’s death. Though Draper was only trying to make a living for herself and her children, her business became successful enough to send her daughters to school — usually reserved for high social classes. Women such as Draper were independent both economically and legally and helped to shape communities in cities.

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In New England, religion played the most prominent role in shaping women's lives. Many New England colonists were Puritans, or followed similar faiths. The Puritans believed that women were more likely to break their religious rules than men and should thus be more tightly controlled. Women had few roles outside of the home, could not participate in town meetings, and generally could not make decisions within their churches.

## WHAT ELSE SHAPED WOMEN'S ROLES ACROSS THE COLONIES?

Other factors could impact the roles women were expected to fill in their communities. For example:

### Native American Identity

Native Americans lived throughout British North America, within European communities, and on their own. Several Native nations, including those of the Iroquois Confederacy (the Tuscarora, Onondaga, Mohawk, Oneida, Cayuga, and Seneca) and the Creek, were matriarchal and matrilineal. This meant that women were considered the leaders of their communities and that children were born into their mother's family, rather than their father's. Women held the power to make decisions for their families and communities.

### Economic Status

Taking care of a home and family could look different for poor and working-class women versus middle-class and wealthier women. While women of all classes might have been taught how to take care of their homes and families, wealthier women, particularly those in families that owned enslaved people or those with indentured servants, would have been taught how to manage a household where labor was done by others as well as by themselves. Outside of the household, wealthier women were involved in upper class social circles through gatherings within their homes.

Meanwhile, poor and working-class women were far more often a part of their broader communities than wealthier women. To take care of their homes and children, they often had to leave them, working in other people's homes and businesses or for themselves in public spaces to earn money.

### Status of Freedom

For women who were not legally free, women's roles were complicated. For both **indentured servants** and **enslaved** women, their primary job was to support someone else, often performing the labor they might have preferred to do for their own families. Some indentured women's contracts stated that they could not be married or have children. Becoming pregnant could mean that more years were added to a woman's contract.

Enslaved women faced extreme challenges. Not only were they forced to spend most of their time and labor serving someone else's family, but they also lived with the constant threat that their own family, including their children, parents, and partners could be taken away at the whim of a slaveholder. And unlike indentured servants, their children would legally be born into the system of slavery, to repeat the cycle. Enslaved women's bodies also legally belonged to their slaveholders, which put them in constant threat of assault.

Despite the harsh conditions of slavery, enslaved women worked to build meaningful lives for themselves and their communities. Sometimes, as in the case of midwives and healers, they were able to carve out positions of authority for themselves, both within and outside of their communities. They might even earn money for this labor, using it to make a difficult situation more bearable for themselves and others.

## MANY WOMEN, MANY STORIES

As we think about women's expected roles, rights, and experiences during the decades before the Revolutionary War, it's important to remember that there was great diversity among them. While it is true that many women's lives

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followed what we may consider to be a traditional path, from daughter to wife and mother, many other women's lives did not. And even within that simple path was quite a bit of variation, depending upon many factors. Recognizing that these women lived a variety of experiences can help us to better understand the complexities of the American Revolution and women's lives within it. What would you ask these women if given the opportunity?

Looking at the various factors that played a part in shaping women's lives during the 18th century, think about today. What are some factors that shape women's roles, rights, and overall lives in the present?



Unit 1 Big Idea