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## A Space of Their Own: Women's Political Involvement in 1790s United States Capitals

Tessa Payer

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A Space of Their Own: Women's Political Involvement in 1790s United States Capitals


A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History from  
The College of William and Mary

by

Tessa Payer

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## *Introduction*

It was a sunny summer day when I visited one of the last remnants of Federal America in New York City; a yellow and white building, matching porches on each side, and an entrance porch complete with Neoclassical columns. This was the Grange, known to the world as the home of Alexander Hamilton, but best known to me as the home of his wife, Eliza Hamilton. Now run by the National Park Service, it was a home I had visited before, but I was excited to return for a celebration of Eliza's birthday and what I hoped would be a reinterpretation focused on her life.

Eliza spent about thirty years in the Grange, compared to Alexander's four, yet the interpretation of the home focused on his life, his politics, and his death. The entrance hall was decorated with an enormous portrait of the former Treasury Secretary, nearly taking up an entire wall, and a marble bust of Hamilton by Ceracchi. The parlor was where he retired with his family, ever the doting father, and the dining room held a replica of the silver wine cooler gifted to Alexander by George Washington during the unfolding scandal of the Reynolds Pamphlet. Eliza was an afterthought.

Eliza Hamilton lived during a time when women's lives were becoming increasingly politicized, and America was changing drastically. As the United States government formed, Eliza enabled discussion in her parlor, hosting receptions where she led conversations on congressional debates. Her dining room was a place where she helped to form American identity through food choices and decorative styles, visually communicating classical motifs. In the privacy of her bedroom, her close relationships further enmeshed her in the political world, connecting her to an infamous Federalist leader as well as a beloved First Lady. She was never

fully cloistered away in the Grange, however, and walked the streets of New York City, the United States capitol between 1789 and 1790, to attend politically driven performances in theatres or engage with sessions of Congress. Her political activity can be traced through the various spaces she inhabited, best of all at her home at the Grange.

I started my research with two ideas; women of all classes were political actors in the 1790s United States, and the spaces they inhabited and navigated through were vitally important to understanding their political work. Though I have found documentary sources illustrating women's political beliefs, feminine words from the eighteenth century are less privileged than those of men. Additional details about the experience of women can be reconstructed, however, through non-traditional sources, namely material culture, to match the non-traditional avenues they used to express themselves. Physical spaces, then, serve as a source for women's political work. Historiographical concepts of feminine space can also be reconsidered. In the 1790s, women were not limited to certain spaces, and navigated through a variety of rooms and outdoor spaces as political actors. As the United States government formed, women reinterpreted traditional gender roles, expressing themselves politically and creating a space of their own.

### *Women in the 1790s*

As early as the mid-nineteenth century, historians reflected on the role of women in the development of the American government. Early writings tended to frame women's behavior, however, as strictly societal, distinct from the political dealings going on in Congress. Rufus Griswold and Elizabeth Ellet both recognized feminine activity and power, but limited such behavior to societal pursuits; as Ellet wrote, her intention was to "exhibit statesmen, leading

ladies, etc, in their drawing-room aspect.”<sup>1</sup> This historiography was only supported by the development of separate spheres ideology, which reached its height in the nineteenth century. This concept provided, as the name suggests, separate domains for men and women; while men received the public, political world, women were the keepers of the home, the moral centers of the family, and oversaw early education and values. In the words of Nancy F. Cott in *The Bonds of Womanhood*, “the doctrine of women’s sphere opened to women (reserved for them), the avenue of domestic influence, religious morality, and child nurture.”<sup>2</sup> Cott argues that this gave a level of social power to women “who previously held no particular avenue of their own- no unique defense of their integrity and dignity,” suggesting, in her view, the eighteenth century may have held few opportunities for women’s sole identities.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1970s, historiography shifted with the rise of New Social history and feminist histories, encouraging further exploration into the actions of women during the Early Federal era. Linda Kerber articulated a specific avenue for women through Republican Motherhood, a term which she coined in 1976. Though a contemporary of Cott, she situated women’s role in the new United States as mothers and wives dedicated “to the service of civic virtue.”<sup>4</sup> Kerber argued that women found political power as they guided their husbands and educated their sons to be proper, virtuous citizens. In 1980, Kerber published *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in*

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<sup>1</sup> Rufus Griswold, *The Republican court: or, American society in the days of Washington* (New York: D. Appleton and Co, 1856); Elizabeth Fries Ellet, *The court circles of the republic, or, The beauties and celebrities of the nation: illustrating life and society under eighteen presidents* (Hartford: Hartford Publishing Co, 1869): iii.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977): 200; Barbara Welter helped coin the idea of separate spheres, and more information can be found in her 1966 article, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860”, *American Quarterly* 18 (1966), 151-174

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Kerber, “The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment: An American Perspective,” *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1976): 202.

*Revolutionary America*, arguing that while “the Revolution had been a strongly politicizing experience, the newly created republic made little room for [women] as political beings.”<sup>5</sup> Seven years later, Kerber took part in a symposium on gender in the Early Republic, “Beyond Roles, Beyond Spheres,” where she argued that historiography needed to move beyond separate spheres to consider women’s activity in nuanced ways; addressing international connections, class, and moving beyond print sources.<sup>6</sup>

Building upon Kerber’s reevaluations, historians in the 1990s began to challenge Republican Motherhood as a framework. In 1997, Margaret Nash wrote “Rethinking Republican Motherhood,” in which she recognized Kerber’s work, but challenged her conclusions, stating “the goal is not to replace ‘republican motherhood’ with a new paradigm, but to remove the blinders that have limited our vision of women in the early republic.”<sup>7</sup> Nash argued that women were not “defined...only or primarily in terms of their motherhood,” asserting the idea of Republican motherhood instead; here, women’s role in the new Republic is connected to their “power over the conduct of adult men”, a larger societal influence rather than just limited to the education of their children.<sup>8</sup> These conclusions opened a variety of new avenues for historians to discuss women’s activity in the 1790s.

Historians have continued to build off Kerber and Nash’s writings, asserting how closely entwined women were with the political process and reinterpreting the definition of politics.

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<sup>5</sup> Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980): 11.

<sup>6</sup> Linda K. Kerber, Nancy F. Cott, Robert Gross, et al, “Beyond Roles, Beyond Spheres: Thinking about Gender in the Early Republic,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1989): 565-585.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret A. Nash, “Rethinking Republican Motherhood: Benjamin Rush and the Young Ladies’ Academy of Philadelphia,” *Journal of the Early American Republic* 17, no. 2 (1997): 191.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 178 and 191.



Authors like Catherine Allgor and Susan Branson chose to focus on early United States capitals as case-studies; Branson took on Philadelphia in *These Fiery Frenchified Dames*, while Catherine Allgor centered in on Washington D.C in *Parlor Politics*.<sup>9</sup> Both historians have advocated for broadened definitions of politics that recognize the numerous avenues, besides the vote, through which women in the 1790s and early nineteenth century expressed their opinions. Allgor wrote in the introduction of her book, “Here Washington women-- both well-known and not-- appear as political actors in their own right, using social events and the ‘private sphere’ to establish the national capital and to build the extraofficial structures so sorely needed in the infant federal government.”<sup>10</sup> Citing both Branson and Allgor, Rosemarie Zagarri described politics in her 2007 book, *Revolutionary Backlash*, as “not only the formal institutions of government but also a wide variety of informal norms, symbolic actions, and everyday behaviors.”<sup>11</sup> This expanded definition has aided in breaking down separate spheres ideology, asserting the importance of women’s activity in typically private spaces to the larger political development of the United States.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Susan Branson argues for women’s centrality to the political process through their engagement in print culture, discussion surrounding the French Revolution, the theater, and salons, while Catherine Allgor displays how women used salons and drawing-room spaces for political maneuvering; Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000): 1.

<sup>11</sup> Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007): 2.

<sup>12</sup> Fredrika J. Teute and David S. Shields have also written on this subject, commenting that American salon and drawing room culture was a “domain of private society that, while permitting mixed conversation, also enabled women to project public concerns- to reform manners, cultivate taste, and critique culture.”; David S. Shields and Fredrika J. Teute, “The Republican Court and the Historiography of a Women's Domain in the Public Sphere,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 35, no. 2 (2015): 171.

Using the work of Nash, Allgor, Branson, and Zagari as a framework, this thesis will continue to break down separate spheres ideology, emphasizing how vital women's activity was to the United States government and creation of American identity. While I will acknowledge the existence of private and public spaces, it will soon become evident that these areas were not clearly bounded and defined; private female correspondence written in the bedroom, for example, created political networks that translated into public alliances. Conceptualizing feminine activity in the 1790s as a definitive separate spheres binary is not useful when considering the nuances and complexities in women's experiences, as women were able to maneuver through a variety of spaces to complete political goals; keeping in mind the broadened definition of politics.

However, to take the arguments of previous historians a step further, this thesis will engage with the spaces themselves rather than just the theoretical idea of private and public. The eighteenth-century home was not simply a private space, nor a public one, but held complex meanings for visitors and occupants. For visitors, the parlor and the dining room were considered public as the only accessible spaces, opened due to their relation to entertainment and sociability. The bedroom, as a room off-limits to visitors, was a private space, dedicated solely to the occupants. However, as occupants, women navigated through the spaces in their own homes without these boundaries, including stepping out onto city streets. Offering women a variety of methods to engage with politics, these rooms, and the material culture within them, become incredibly important to the narrative of women's political activity.

## *Material Culture*

In “Material Things and Cultural Meanings,” Ann Smart Martin reflects on the study of material culture; the physical artifacts, both man-made and natural, that help us to understand the lived experience of the past. Though perhaps simple in appearance, Martin notes that they “are far more than mere tools; they are complex bundles of individual, social, and cultural meanings grafted onto something that can be seen, touched, and owned.”<sup>13</sup> Material items can be found in all walks of life, and while intent is hard to judge, they can be studied to understand relationships, identity, economic production and consumption, social and cultural meanings, and more. Material culture, then, can open a window into the past, allowing us to engage with the life of individuals throughout history.

Most revolutionary about material culture is how it can illuminate the narratives of those who could not engage with documentary sources, or whose voices are not privileged in written documents. Most relevant in this case, of course, are the lives of women of all classes in 1790s America. While lower class women did not have access to the education of the upper classes, even elite women tended to burn their personal correspondence, partly a societal standard and partly an attempt for privacy.<sup>14</sup> Material culture can fill in these narrative gaps. While a woman’s words may be missing, viewing her gown, the space she entertained in, and the writing desk she used can aid in reconstructing her lived experience, helping us to understand how she moved, worked, and breathed. Women’s material culture can be an expression of their agency; choices

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<sup>13</sup> Ann Smart Martin, "Material Things and Cultural Meanings: Notes on the Study of Early American Material Culture." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (1996): 5-6.

<sup>14</sup> Maria Kimberly, “George Washington’s Papers,” George Washington’s Mount Vernon, accessed March 20<sup>th</sup> 2020, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/george-washingtons-papers/>.

they made for how they wanted to live and be seen, or, in the case of enslaved women, how they lived despite many choices having been made for them.

Increasingly, historians have written about the intersection of material culture, women's activity, and the 1790s, particularly the role each played in the creation of American identity. In "Furnishing the Republican Court: Building and Decorating Philadelphia Homes, 1790-1800," Amy Hudson Henderson argues that women played a role in the construction of political culture as they decorated their homes; Henderson recognizes female activity behind the male names on the bills, characterizing women as active consumers who created a public image through the items they purchased.<sup>15</sup> Teresa Teixeira's "From Fabulous to Frump: The Changing Fashions of Martha Washington" shows how the First Lady actively chose clothing to visually communicate her husband's policies and characterize America as a meritocracy.<sup>16</sup> In *First Ladies of the Republic*, Jeanne Abrams highlights how these women used material culture to shape American identity, from fashion choices to serving lemonade rather than wine at receptions.<sup>17</sup> Of course, it is difficult to exactly determine the intent of women's design and consumer choices, and whether they were buying specifically to communicate a political message or following popular trends. Either way, however, women contributed to American political culture by popularizing styles that became tied to American identity in the 1790s, visually communicating American experience through material culture.

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<sup>15</sup> Amy Hudson Henderson, "Furnishing the Republican Court: Building and Decorating Philadelphia Homes, 1790-1800," PhD, University of Delaware, 2008: 40.

<sup>16</sup> Teresa Teixeira, "From Fabulous to Frump: The Changing Fashions of Martha Washington," Master's thesis, George Mason University, 2017: 82-84; Kate Haulman also addressed the role of fashion in partisan conflict in the 1790s in the epilogue of her 2011 book, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America*.

<sup>17</sup> Jeanne E. Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic* (New York: New York University Press, 2018): 44 and 79.

## *Overview*

With these theoretical frameworks in mind, this paper will dive into women's political activity in the 1790s, explored through their use of space. I will analyze the ways in which women navigated through rooms in the home and the city streets to express themselves politically, becoming intrinsic to the American political process. Geographically, my focus will rest on two of the most political cities in the 1790s, the United States capitals of New York City and Philadelphia. Each chapter will address a different place in the lives of women to display the varied methods women used for political influence. Chapter One, "The Politicization of 'Domestic Space': Women and American Identity in the Parlor and Dining Room" will discuss how women harnessed traditional spaces of sociability to create United States political culture, embodied in the Republican Court. Chapter Two, "Private Lives: Women and Political Identity in the Bedroom," will use the bedroom as a space to understand the shifts in gender roles during the post-Revolutionary period, and how these changes impacted development of women's private political identities. Chapter Three, "On the Streets of New York and Philadelphia: Women's Public Political Activity," will follow women out of the home, as they engaged in partisan conflict and harnessed their public forum to assert feminine political themes. Focusing on physical space and the lived feminine experience, this paper will display how women were clearly a part of American political life in the 1790s, political actors in their own right. Stepping into the spaces in which Eliza Hamilton, alongside Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, Ona Judge, and other women lived and worked, their political contributions will become apparent.

*The Politicization of 'Domestic Space': Women and American Identity in the Parlor and Dining Room*

For Martha Washington, 1789 to 1790 brought a whirlwind of change. Not only had she become the inaugural First Lady<sup>18</sup>, a role that she was creating step by step, but she had moved three times; from Mount Vernon to a house on the corner of Cherry and Dover in New York City, then to the Macomb Mansion on Broadway, and now to a three-story brick mansion on Sixth and Market streets in Philadelphia.<sup>19</sup> Shuffled from house to house, she found herself trying to maintain the ceremonies and principles that she had begun as First Lady in parlors and dining rooms of different sizes and layouts. In the President's House in Philadelphia, Martha was greeted with a particularly striking architectural feature, a two-story bow projection on the south façade of the home. Either semicircular or semi-octagonal, it was constructed of brick with stonework over the second-story windows, and an iron roof. George Washington had specifically asked for the addition, writing to his secretary, Tobias Lear, "it is proposed to add Bow Windows to the two public Rooms in the South front of the House," having commented earlier that the home was "inadequate to the commodious accommodation of my family."<sup>20</sup>

The new window extended the size of the parlor and dining room, two rooms that Martha controlled in her dual roles as a wife running a household and as First Lady, so she likely proposed the addition. Though she was used to hosting large crowds at Mount Vernon and at various winter encampments during the Revolution, as First Lady she had instituted a rigorous social schedule, opening these spaces to government officials, diplomats, and members of

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<sup>18</sup> Martha Washington served as First Lady from April 1789 to March 1797.

<sup>19</sup> Patricia Brady, *Martha Washington: An American Life* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2005): 163-186.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Lawler Jr, "The President's House in Philadelphia: The Rediscovery of a Lost Landmark," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* CXXVI, no. 1 (January 2002): 23.

Philadelphia society with their mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters. Adding a bow window was a conscious recognition of the value of this space and the importance of Martha's hosting duties. Though George, as the head of the household, had a nominal control of finances, the political role that Martha played shines through in this addition.

Like the other material goods in her house, from tea sets to dinnerware to the clothes she wore, the bow window was imbued with symbolic meaning; a visual language of fashionable goods. With its addition, the President's House could be recognized as part of a visual community rooted in the new neoclassical style. As she lived and entertained in the home, Martha cemented her reputation as someone who was fashionable, educated enough to stay abreast of the latest trends, and wealthy enough to keep them. Displayed on the President's House, the bow window was positioned as an American style, setting architectural precedents for the visual look of the new country.<sup>21</sup>

The parlor and dining room were two unique spaces in the eighteenth-century home, both in their interpretation of private and public spaces, and the way they were harnessed by women for political means. These rooms were female controlled spaces open to the public, where women harnessed concepts of display and identity for personal and political expression. Here, women set precedents for what the United States would look like and how politics would function. The parlor and the dining room were the sites of their Congress, where women decided what shape national culture would take. Like the Senate and the House, each room had a specialized function, highlighting a different aspect of women's political behavior. The

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<sup>21</sup> Lawler argues that this bow window is "considered the progenitor of the oval rooms of the White House."; Lawler, "The President's House in Philadelphia," 25.

American conception of the salon, a place of intellectual discussion overseen by women, developed in the parlor. In the dining room, women specifically picked who sat at their tables to push for their husbands' policies and lobby for their own visions of change. In both spaces, the negotiation between traditional European styles and new American values was evident not just in conversation, but in the decoration of the rooms and the food served at social occasions. The identity conflict found in these spaces was also embodied by women, whose fashions became increasingly politicized. The dining room and the parlor gave women, who lacked the right to vote, a space to influence what the fledgling country would become.

### *The Development and Politicization of Social Spaces*

Throughout the eighteenth century, the dining room and parlor developed as specialized spaces of public entertainment and hospitality, overseen by women. Though the dining room obviously had an emphasis on eating, and the parlor suggested polite conversation, both spaces developed as formalized hosting areas as colonists became settled in America and shifted from an emphasis on function to more ornamental pursuits. This development was especially apparent in elite homes, where social spaces began to be separated from sleeping and working areas, eventually leading to the creation of the parlor as the "best room...where the hosts and their guests could repair before or after a meal."<sup>22</sup> Just as design and furnishings "signaled [the parlor's] purpose as a genteel space for tea, cards, dancing, and especially conversation," so too did increasingly specialized dinnerware, from soup tureens to jelly glasses, characterize the dining room as a refined eating space.<sup>23</sup> These spaces functioned as part of a culture of

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<sup>22</sup> Amy Hudson Henderson, "Furnishing the Republican Court: Building and Decorating Philadelphia Homes, 1790-1800," PhD, University of Delaware, 2008: 220.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid; More information on the development of these spaces, see Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, and Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), as well as Mark R. Wenger, "The Dining Room in Early Virginia," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 3 (1989): 149-159.



hospitality. For the upper class, for whom this culture was accessible, hospitality was a way to cement both class and familial loyalties and perform wealth and status.<sup>24</sup> Martha Washington, growing up in eighteenth century Virginia, would have been aware of the development of these rooms and how they sat under her purview as a young, elite woman. Her knowledge of these spaces, mirrored in elite women throughout the colonies, informed her interactions with them in the 1790s.

As mentioned in the introduction, the upper-class eighteenth-century home was never a purely private structure; in fact, both the exterior and interior of the home were tied up in public display, signaling wealth and status to those passing by and those invited inside. With the development of the United States government, homes took on a political meaning, as “elite Americans-- Federalists and Republicans alike-- located a family’s political ideology in the size, appointment, decoration, and use of its home.”<sup>25</sup> As traditional spaces of entertainment, the parlor and dining room were wrapped up in this framework; spaces meant to be on display to the public. And, as the arbiters of entertainment and managers of the household, women controlled these spaces and made important decisions regarding décor and social events hosted there.

It is important to note that these spaces were not open to all women. Though I have been using “women” in general to describe feminine political activity, elite women were the only ones invited to engage in discussions and society within these rooms. Daniel Kilbride, in “Cultivation, Conservatism, and the Early National Gentry,” characterizes the social events of the post-

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<sup>24</sup> Daniel Kilbride, “Cultivation, Conservatism, and the Early National Gentry: The Manigault Family and Their Circle,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 19, no. 2 (1999): 225.

<sup>25</sup> Henderson, “Furnishing the Republican Court,” 69.

Revolutionary era as serving “to maintain a single aristocratic sensibility in the American elite.”<sup>26</sup> However, this consolidation was not possible without the work of a much larger group of lower class and enslaved women. Their presence can be felt in everything from the upholstered chairs in parlors, which women would have been involved in both making and arranging, to the food on the dining room table, often cooked by enslaved women. The discussions taking place in the dining room and parlor were built upon the work of women who were not extended the privilege to engage. Despite their exclusion, less privileged women were aware of the political shifts and discussions of identity that were physically evident in these spaces. Surviving written sources tend to highlight the elite, but with material culture, the stories of the less privileged and their political impact can be brought to light.

After the ratification and adoption of the Constitution in 1788, as the United States government as we know it today began to come into shape, women’s work in the parlor and dining room became increasingly politicized. With the document written, women involved themselves in its translation into real life and in figuring out what America would look and act like. Harnessing their ideological purview over “manners”, referring to a whole host of cultural behaviors and material items, women engaged with the formation of a new nation.<sup>27</sup> America had separated from England, but had long relied on the rituals and trappings of the mother country; these traditions would not be given up so easily. Just as men in Congress debated whether the

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<sup>26</sup> Kilbride, “Cultivation, Conservatism, and the Early National Gentry,” 225.

<sup>27</sup> Women in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century were increasingly viewed as the moral centers of the home and society, and thus were expected to exert some influence in this regard, setting national precedents. Often, women were associated with the spread of proper ‘manners’, referring not only to behavior, but to fashion, entertainment, the arts, etc. Benjamin Rush, an advocate for female education, stated “let the ladies of a country be educated properly and they will not only make and administer its laws, but form its manners and character,” displaying popular rhetoric of the time; Henderson, “Furnishing the Republican Court,”

country would rely on agrarian pursuits or turn to industry, women, in their dining rooms and parlors, determined if national culture would resemble England or branch into a new American style.<sup>28</sup> What emerged in the 1790s was the Republican Court, a culture of conversation and political discussion that emerged in the salons, visits, dinner parties, and other social events surrounding the United States government. Though women had always been in charge of the dining room and parlor and supervised the social events taking place within those spaces, they now found themselves in control of a political socio-cultural phenomenon. Jeanne Abrams states that the events in the parlor and dining room “allowed [women] to help shape public opinion and the social and political parameters of the emerging republic. [Women also] helped develop cultural unity and a distinctive American political style.”<sup>29</sup> Through the framework of the Republican Court, women found a foothold in the development of American politics, as they balanced European traditions with American values in their social events and carved out a space for accepted female political discussion.

The spaces themselves were not empty vessels for political discussion and social events; the material items that filled them were also imbued with meaning. Material goods were intertwined with the perpetuation of culture and ideas, harnessed by individuals to display wealth and taste, which Bernard Herman describes as “a system of social and cultural values focused in the eighteenth century on regularity, hierarchy, order, and standardization.”<sup>30</sup> With these

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<sup>28</sup> Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788-1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993): 13-29.

<sup>29</sup> Jeanne Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2005): 12-13.

<sup>30</sup> Bernard L. Herman. "Tabletop Conversations: Material Culture and Everyday Life in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World," in *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830*, ed. John Styles and Amanda Vickery (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006): 43; Taste can be seen as a non-tangible parallel to manners, mentioned in the previous paragraph, both themes that would enable and guide women's influence on American identity in the 1790s.

frameworks in place earlier in the eighteenth century, the United States harnessed material culture after the Revolution to make sense of shifting notions of American identity. As Amy Hudson Henderson writes, material culture can be used to read the contradictory desire of elite women “to perpetuate the aristocratic patterns of behavior that had ordered their lives prior to the war” while conforming to American ideals of equality and republican simplicity.<sup>31</sup> Despite the shared visual culture, both Federalists and Democratic Republicans targeted material culture in their rhetoric, offering no clear picture as to what the physical representation of an American was. This was the material morass that women navigated through in their dining rooms and parlors, exerting their agency in the decisions they made for decoration and dress.

*“Republican Simplicity”: Fashion and Identity in the New Nation*

Abigail Franks Hamilton may have disliked attending receptions and assemblies, but she had to admit that they were the perfect venue for observing the latest fashions in Philadelphia. In the President’s House, women gathered in their finest, curtsying before the modestly dressed Martha Washington before circling the room, ready to see and be seen. Abigail’s eye could not help but be drawn to the printed cottons, muslins, and silks that crowded into the First Lady’s drawing room, and she dutifully reported on the gowns, jackets, and petticoats to her friend, Sarah Franklin Bache, currently abroad in England. On November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1792, she was drawn to one figure in particular; Lucy Knox, wife of the Secretary of War, Henry Knox, and a close friend of Martha Washington’s. She is “worth going to see.” Abigail wrote, before diving into a description of Lucy’s dress: “Figure to yourself a fancy dress, purple body, long white sleeves

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<sup>31</sup> Henderson, "Furnishing the Republican Court," 39-40.

gold muslin train,' worn with a purple satin turban festooned with beads."<sup>32</sup> To Abigail, she was "the Goddess of War, in status quo," a proper classical allusion for a woman of the new American republic.

However, Abigail also commented, "Tell me would she not do in England?"<sup>33</sup> For a people who had just split from England's rule, the idea that men and women still dressed like their previous monarchs was dangerous. This was a tool that would be wielded by many a Federalist and Democratic-Republican in the years to come, used to cast doubt on the loyalties of the other party. Abigail may have meant no harm in the comparison since her friend Sarah was in England, and her own family had expressed Loyalist leanings during the Revolution.<sup>34</sup> The comparison was still deadly, casting Lucy Knox as unrepublican. Seen in the context of her husband's Federalist beliefs, Lucy's dress might, as Kate Haulman notes, "signify the high-handedness, Anglophilia, and industrial vision of the Treasury secretary and his supporters."<sup>35</sup> Lucy may have been following the latest styles, dressing to impress as she had before the American Revolution, but in doing so, she exposed herself to a feminine form of political criticism.

Tied in with larger debates about American identity was the important question of what a proper American should look like. How should an American dress, especially when the country

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<sup>32</sup> Kate Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011): 221.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Abigail's father, David Franks, was a Loyalist. Her sister, Rebecca Franks, was painted by British Major John André, attended the famous British ball in Philadelphia, the Meschianza, married British officer Henry Johnson, and later moved to England; Leo Hershkowitz, "Rebecca Franks," Jewish Women's Archive, accessed December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/franks-rebecca>.

<sup>35</sup> Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America*, 222.

had relied on fabric and garment imports from England for years and had a lack of widespread domestic manufacture? Eighteenth-century rhetoric cast dress as the purview of women, with writers “charging Anglo-American women with [the creation of national dress].”<sup>36</sup> Priscilla Mason, giving her valedictory address to the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia in 1791, argued that the United States “could not be independent while we receive our fashions from other countries,” and proposed “the creation of a senate of women for the ‘truly important business of regulating dress and fashions.’”<sup>37</sup> Women like Martha Washington were looked to as fashion icons, setting the stage for what the United States would look like, but lacking clear guidelines to follow. Though fashion had always been used as a mark of status, wealth, and good character, women now found themselves dressing for different standards, whether they intentionally followed them or not. Not bound by pre-Revolution styles, largely borrowed from Europe, American women in the 1790s found a new avenue for political impact in the fashion choices they made.

Just like the political situation, fashion styles in the 1790s were in a period of transition. Styles of the 1770s and 1780s were increasingly inspired by neoclassical trends. Dresses à l’antique became popular in France, and later the United States, hearkening to the dress of ancient Greece and Rome as America itself was building a government influenced by ancient political trends.<sup>38</sup> Waistlines rose, skirts and sleeves narrowed, and adornment became simple to the point that white, like the white marble of ancient statues, was the favored color.<sup>39</sup> Lightweight

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<sup>36</sup> Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America*, 224.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>38</sup> Ann Buermann Wass, “Regulating the Dresses of the Ladies” in *An Agreeable Tyrant* (Washington, DC: DAR Museum, 2016): 39.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

muslin, which imitated the ‘wet drapery effect’ of classical statuary, was a popular textile choice (Figure 1). However, though this style suggested the “republican simplicity” that popular rhetoric advocated, it could never be fully accepted as an ideologically American style, as it “was an imported style that...reinforced the association between fashion and women.”<sup>40</sup> Muslin was often imported from India, suggesting an imperial, foreign context and a reliance on imports. On the other hand, domestically manufactured homespun had a symbolic importance and was “synonymous with simple, unaffected virtue,” but was never made in large enough quantity or proper quality to “form a significant part of most people’s wardrobes.”<sup>41</sup> Americans sometimes took to adapting European styles, such as the dresses à l’antique, to American sensibilities; Rosalie Stier Calvert wrote that “in this more virtuous land only the contours are perceived through filmy batiste- a subtler fashion.”<sup>42</sup> With no clear American style and no mass production of American textiles, women found themselves looking back towards Europe for fashion styles, though they required some adaptation.

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<sup>40</sup> Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth Century America*, 224; Kate Haulman describes how fashion was tied to luxury, a negative concept, in popular rhetoric throughout the eighteenth century. Being too ‘in fashion’ was often criticized as unreasonable and impassioned, sometimes a form of slavery, even as it was expected in elite circles. Fashion would be harnessed rhetorically by both political parties, as described later. However, it is important to note that often, rhetoric and what was actually worn everyday differed, and many Americans continued to wear adaptations of fashionable European styles.

<sup>41</sup> Wass, “Regulating the Dresses of the Ladies” in *An Agreeable Tyrant*, 39.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



Figure 1- Women's Dress (Open Robe), 1795-1800, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Martha Washington used her fashion experience from the American Revolution in creating her own signature style during George Washington's presidency; a specifically feminine political statement. To convey "a message of enlightenment virtues while retaining the respect of foreign dignitaries used to opulent European courts," Martha wore "exceptionally plain, unadorned clothing that was constructed of visibly expensive material."<sup>43</sup> The Washington household accounts from Philadelphia show purchases of black silk, muslin, and cambric, likely from the milliners and mantua-makers of the city.<sup>44</sup> Abigail Adams commented that Martha "is plain in her dress, but that plainness is the best of every article," writing a month later that "an unaffected deportment...renders her the object of veneration and Respect...I found myself much more deeply impressd than I ever did before their Majesties of Britain."<sup>45</sup> In her simple, expensive gowns, Martha created a visual for the role of First Lady: a female American leader,

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<sup>43</sup> Teresa Teixeira, "From Fabulous to Frump: The Changing Fashions of Martha Washington." Master's thesis, George Mason University, 2017: 80-81.

<sup>44</sup> *Washington Household Journal, March 1793*, document, from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, *Historical Society of Pennsylvania Collection of George Washington family papers*, accessed May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019; Milliners made and sold fashionable accessories for men and women, while mantua-makers were 18<sup>th</sup> century gown makers. These businesses were often run solely by women; Edward Crews, "The Millinery Shop," *Colonial Williamsburg* (1997-98): 63-67.

<sup>45</sup> Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, July 12<sup>th</sup>, 1789*, letter, from *Abigail Adams: Letters*, ed. Edith Gelles (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2016): 470.



worthy of respect, but with none of the ostentation of the queens of Europe. Charlotte Chambers compared Martha to the ambassadors' wives in 1795, giving an excellent contrast between American and European styles; "She was dressed in a rich silk, but entirely without ornament, except the animation her amiable heart gives to her countenance. Next to her were seated the wives of the foreign ambassadors, glittering from the floor to the summit of their headdress...Such superabundance of ornament struck me as injudicious."<sup>46</sup> When Martha did wear jewelry, it was muted. The Smithsonian owns an amber necklace once owned by Martha (Figure 2); Mount Vernon's website notes that "amber was important to the Greeks and Romans, so it is not surprising that it rose to great popularity in the classical revivals of the Federal period."<sup>47</sup> Whether wearing simple textiles or alluding to classical republics, Martha Washington's clothing was all chosen quite consciously as she created the role of First Lady.



*Figure 2 and 3- Martha Washington's Amber Necklace, 18<sup>th</sup> century, National Museum of American History; Dress, Silk, Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.*

A surviving dress of Martha's (Figure 3) helps illustrate how this performance of republican simplicity and American virtue was, quite literally, put on. A transitional style, it

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<sup>46</sup> Teixeira, "From Fabulous to Frump," 80-81.

<sup>47</sup> Teixeira, "From Fabulous to Frump," 80-81.

combines facets of 1790s fashion but also hearkens to earlier trends; the gown has a rounded neckline, tight, long sleeves, center front closure, and point at the back of the bodice, but also bodice straps that suggest the earlier stomacher style.<sup>48</sup> This was a conscious decision of Martha's, shying away from the latest trends so as to not appear too caught up in fashion, but still recognizably stylish; she would even complain to Fanny Bassett Washington in 1789, "you would I fear think me a good deal in the fashion if you could see me."<sup>49</sup> Martha obviously held this transitional style in high esteem, as she chose to be depicted in it for her 1795 portrait by Charles Willson Peale, suggesting that this was the public image she wanted to convey.<sup>50</sup> Teresa Teixeira describes this style as "elegant plainness," and it proved incredibly successful, making enough of an impression that she was often remembered wearing this garment, even today.

Martha Washington's conscious choice of clothing was not limited to her own wardrobe, but also included the wardrobes of the enslaved individuals owned by the Washingtons. The presidential couple's clothing exuded an aura of wealth and authority, and their enslaved individuals were tied into this display. Ona Judge, born in 1773 to Betty, found herself tied twofold to Martha's public appearance. As Erica Armstrong Dunbar writes, "Judge was responsible for Martha Washington's appearance. She selected her gowns, made small repairs on aging skirts, removing stains whether they be from food or the dirt from the unpaved streets, and

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<sup>48</sup> "Dress," George Washington's Mount Vernon, accessed December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

<https://www.mountvernon.org/preservation/collections-holdings/browse-the-museum-collections/object/w-1523/>.

<sup>49</sup> Martha Washington, *Martha Washington to Fanny Bassett Washington, June 8<sup>th</sup>, 1789*, letter, from "Worthy Partner": *The Papers of Martha Washington*, ed. Joseph A. Fields (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994): 215-216.

<sup>50</sup> Teixeira, "From Fabulous to Frump," 84-86.

then dressed her.”<sup>51</sup> Aiding her mistress in choosing garments, Judge was no doubt aware about the performance Martha put on as First Lady. Accompanying Martha on social calls, she was part of the performance and was dressed as such; though her clothes were nicer than those worn in the fields at Mount Vernon, they bound her to the Washington family. What may have looked like a depiction of American virtue and the authority of the presidential family was, for her, a mark of their authority over her. There are no specific accounts of her clothing, except a mention that “she has many changes of very good clothes of all sorts, but they are not sufficiently recollected to describe” in her runaway advertisement.<sup>52</sup> It speaks to her personal agency that, when Ona Judge escaped to freedom, she took with her the clothes that had once tied her to the Washingtons, claiming them as her own.

After Ona Judge helped her to dress, Martha Washington would have entered the parlor or the dining room to see similar fashion styles, with no distinction as to political party. Both Federalists and Democratic-Republicans shared similar fashions, but as partisan battles became increasingly volatile, fashion-related rhetoric was deployed to discredit the other side’s policies. Criticism often fell upon women who proclaimed their American identity by wearing the latest European styles and using material display to represent their wealth and status, as this was tied negatively to luxurious, ostentatious behavior. Lucy Knox was not the only woman to be criticized in this way. Anne Willing Bingham, known for her “desire to introduce European standards in Philadelphia” as opposed to Martha’s work towards “republican simplicity,” was painted in 1797 wearing a low cut, black velvet dress, inspired by neoclassical themes, and

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<sup>51</sup> Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *Never Caught: The Washingtons’ Relentless Pursuit of their Runaway Slave Ona Judge* (New York: 37 Ink, 2017): 36.

<sup>52</sup> Ona Judge’s runaway advertisement, *Claypoole’s American Daily Advertiser*, May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1796, cited in Dunbar, *Never Caught*, 99.

holding a copy of Constantin-Francois Chasseboeuf's *Voyage en Syrie et en Egypt*, signaling her education and fondness of the French.<sup>53</sup> She and her daughters were often criticized for their adoption of French fashions, especially after her younger daughter eloped with the Comte de Tilly.<sup>54</sup> Abigail Adams, whose fashion trends tended to follow Martha's own, was shocked to see the dress of the three Bingham ladies at her own drawing room:

The stile of dress...is really an outrage upon all decency. I will describe it as it has appeared even at the drawing room. A sattin petticoat of certainly not more than three bredths gored at the top, nothing beneath but a chemise...the arm naked almost to the shoulder and without stays or bodice. A tight girdle round the waist, and the 'rich luxurience of naturs charms' without a handkerchief fully displayed...The mother of the lady described and sister, being fine women and in the first rank, are leaders of the fashion, but they show more of the [bosom] than the decent matron, or the modest woman.<sup>55</sup>

Heidi Campbell-Shoaf writes that "as the United States embarked on its great experiment in representative democracy there was the unprecedented opportunity for its citizens to decide for themselves how they would express the new political and cultural attitude in the garments they wore."<sup>56</sup> This challenge was particularly potent in the hands of women, who found themselves dressing in a new country with new rhetorical standards. Some women, like Martha Washington, intentionally dressed in more republican fashions, setting tones for the broader American political culture and projecting an image of respectability to foreign powers. Others

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<sup>53</sup> Henderson, "Furnishing the Republican Court," 367-369.

<sup>54</sup> Robert C. Alberts, *The Golden Voyage* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969): 371.

<sup>55</sup> Alberts, *The Golden Voyage*, 378; Eliza Hamilton also provided an account of a fashion faux-pas at one of Martha Washington's receptions, stating, "I remember a very exciting scene in one of her earlier receptions. Ostrich plumes waving high over the head formed a part of the evening headdress of a fashionable belle of that time. Miss McEvers, sister of Mrs. Edward Livingston, who was present, had plumes unusually high. The ceiling of the drawing-room of the President's house near Franklin Square, was rather low, and Miss McEvers' plumes were ignited by the flame of the chandelier. Major Jackson, Washington's aide-de-camp sprang to the rescue of the young lady, and extinguished the fire by smothering it with his hands."; Katharine Schuyler Baxter, *A Godchild of Washington, a picture of the past* (New York: F. Tennyson Neely, 1897): 224.

<sup>56</sup> Heidi Campbell-Shoaf, "Preface" in *An Agreeable Tyrant* (Washington, DC: DAR Museum, 2016): 7.

continued to follow the tide of fashion, for reasons as clear as Anne Willing Bingham's support of French culture, or because they simply followed the trends popularized in cities like New York and Philadelphia. Intent is often hard to read, but women at this time were clearly aware that dress had become increasingly politicized in the context of the new United States, and it was on display in two increasingly politicized spaces; the parlor and the dining room.

### *Political Sociability and the Parlor*

The sound of conversation, a rumbling of the state of affairs in France, greeted Mary Willing's ears as she ascended the stairs towards her aunt Elizabeth's second-floor front parlor. The room always seemed crowded, whether arranged for a ball or a salon. The popularity spoke to the hosting ability of her father's elegant youngest sister, Elizabeth Powel. All of Philadelphia society agreed that Elizabeth Powel hosted one of the greatest salons in the city, bringing all the social elite together for discussion of "cultural and intellectual pursuits in an atmosphere of sociability."<sup>57</sup> Now, with the United States government situated in Philadelphia, Mary's aunt Elizabeth not only hosted the local elite, but government officials, diplomats, and their female relations. Drawing on the French salon practice, Elizabeth Powel adapted it to suit American purposes.

The room was set up exactly as Elizabeth Powel wanted it, for she very consciously decorated the space for her salons; the furniture signifying the type of event. Tables and chairs pushed to the sides of the room would have signaled an assembly, with room for dancing, but Mary instead saw richly upholstered sofas and chairs, tea tables, tea services, saucers and cups; a

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<sup>57</sup> Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001): 126.

salon, then, with beverages to stimulate conversation. The Powel's indentured servants, paid staff, and enslaved individuals made this possible, shifting furniture according to Elizabeth's wishes, so she could facilitate conversations. Elizabeth herself took a prominent position on a sofa, leading discussion; Mary's Aunt Ann would comment later that "when in society [Elizabeth] will animate and give a brilliancy to the whole Conversation," yet, "her Patriotism causes too much Anxiety. Female politicians are always ridiculed by the other Sex."<sup>58</sup> However, in this room, her political opinions were welcomed, having always been a part of the salon tradition and now becoming increasingly ingrained in American political culture.

The decoration of the room itself marked the space as elegant, a place of intellectual discussion among Philadelphia's elites (Figure 4). Mary recognized decorative carving on the ceiling, ornamented scrolls, and detailing around the chimney from her own home and those of other elite members of Philadelphia society. These shared decorative aspects linked the Philadelphia upper class, now including members of the United States government, in a shared visual community. Of course, none of this was possible without the Philadelphia artisans who were hired to do such work.<sup>59</sup> One particularly striking motif in the room was the marble fireplace and its ornamentally carved mantelpiece. Here, Mary could recognize Aesop's fable of *The Dog and His Shadow*, an ideological balance from the lush ornamentation in the rest of the space. The

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<sup>58</sup> Katharine Diane Lee, "'The Young Women Here Enjoy a Liberty': Philadelphia Women and the Public Sphere, 1760s-1840s," PhD, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey (2016): 316; According to popular legend, Elizabeth Powel was the woman who asked Benjamin Franklin "Well Doctor what have we got a republic or a monarchy," to which he famously replied, "A republic...if you can keep it"; Samantha Snyder, "Elizabeth Willing Powel," George Washington's Mount Vernon, accessed November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/elizabeth-willing-powel/#note7>.

<sup>59</sup> Among the artisans hired by the Powels were Hercules Courtenay, James Clow, James Reynolds, Nicholas Bernard, and Martin Jugiez; Alexandra Alevizatos Kirtley, "Front Parlor from the Powel House," *Winterthur Portfolio* 46, no. 2/3 (2012): E17.

fable “told of the hazards of greed,” and by displaying it, the Powels not only marked this room as the place of elevated, intellectual conversation, but showed their recognition of limits; proper values for a family living in the new American nation.<sup>60</sup> When it got too hot, the crowd adding to the fire lit in the fireplace, Mary retreated to the row of windows, looking out towards the Delaware River. Not only could her aunt afford the beautiful items inside the space and oversee the conversations happening within, but with this view, it was as if she could control nature itself.



*Figure 4- Second Floor Parlor of the Powel House. Woodwork and plasterwork. Philadelphia Museum of Art.*

Mary Willing’s aunt Elizabeth Powel was not the only woman in the 1790s to oversee political discussions in her parlor. A space controlled by women, it proved unique as a room where women could lead political discussions, adopting the European salon and adapting it for a new American context. The parlor was also a room curated by women, as they made decisions about material culture that fed into the creation of an American style. The eighteenth-century parlor, of course, was not for the family alone and functioned as a public space. In this room,

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<sup>60</sup> House Tour, Powel House, Philadelphia, PA. May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

women carved out a space to publicly engage in discourse about American identity and the formation of American political culture.

The primary occasion for such discourse was the salon, which became more prominent in parlors of elite American women around the mid-eighteenth century and afforded those women privileged enough to enter a space to discuss politics and intellectual pursuits. The role of women at these gatherings was not a uniquely American phenomenon; British and French female hostesses, called *salonnières*, were expected to bring a harmonizing nature to these events, soothing disparate opinions, yet were still afforded “the liberty to speak speculatively about politics, religion, [and] philosophy.”<sup>61</sup> However, American salons were much more intentionally politicized, a female supervised venue for individuals to discuss and develop ideas about American identity, both in words spoken and material items on display.

Salons further cemented their political importance as part of the Republican Court as notable women, such as Martha Washington, integrated them into the workings of United States political culture. Thrust into the role of First Lady, Martha was given the opportunity to quite literally create the position, which remained largely undefined.<sup>62</sup> She drew on her own experience as a Virginia hostess and wife of the Commander-in-Chief, but, as Jeanne Abrams writes, Martha and George Washington both “appropriated at least some of the old monarchical traditions to bolster [their] authority.”<sup>63</sup> Negotiating the balance between aristocracy and democracy, Martha began a strict schedule of social events, making herself accessible to government officials, local

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<sup>61</sup> David S. Shields and Fredrika J. Teute, “The Republican Court and the Historiography of a Women’s Domain in the Public Sphere,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 35, no. 2 (2015): 172.

<sup>62</sup> The term ‘First Lady’ had not come into practice yet, but serves to emphasize the role Martha Washington was pioneering.

<sup>63</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 71.



elite, and diplomats and enabling conversation and “social civility around the new national government.”<sup>64</sup> In her new role, Martha laid out a path not only for future First Ladies, but for American political culture in general.

Most notable was Martha’s Friday night reception, or levée.<sup>65</sup> As the name suggests, it was a blend of European and American styles, an attempt to draw on the authority and respect of the monarchy while still emphasizing American values. These receptions served to connect “the government more visibly with its citizens”; a flawed plan, since only upper class members of society were allowed to enter and greet Martha Washington, while lower class citizens labored to make these events possible.<sup>66</sup> These receptions were meticulously choreographed and took place in the Washington’s parlor; in New York City, the room was expanded before the presidential couple moved in, an \$800 project.<sup>67</sup> Like the bow window in Philadelphia, this addition recognized the value of Martha’s receptions. Abigail Adams, who often attended Martha’s receptions, described how “col Humphries or mr Lear- receives every Lady at the door, & Hands her up to mrs washington to whom she makes a most Respectfull curtzey.”<sup>68</sup> Abrams comments of this ritual, “courtly refinement [a trait fostered by the British] remained a valued trait in the new republic because gentlemanly manners appeared to help inspire trust.”<sup>69</sup> Martha Washington

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> These events have been described interchangeably as receptions, drawing rooms, and levees. Drawing rooms tend to refer to the room itself. The word ‘levee’ was borrowed from a French royal ceremony, in which courtiers were permitted to view the monarch; yet another example of the melding of European and American traditions to create a new American political culture. “A Day in the Life of Louis XIV,” Chateau de Versailles, accessed on November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

<sup>66</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 74.

<sup>67</sup> Amanda Michelle Milian, “The Politics of Dinner: Presidential Entertaining in the Early Republic,” Master’s thesis, Texas Christian University, 2012: 17.

<sup>68</sup> *Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1789*, letter, from *Abigail Adams: Letters*, ed. Edith Gelles (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2016): 474.

<sup>69</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 77.

sat in a place of honor, watching over the gathering, though she chose a “raised platform instead of a gilded throne.”<sup>70</sup> She must have appeared even more magnificent in Philadelphia, where she stood bathed in the natural light of the bow window. After their greetings, women could mingle. Susan Branson notes that these receptions “provided women who had access to this circle with an opportunity to court political figures...simultaneously participating in political culture and helping to make politics an accepted part of women’s public lives.”<sup>71</sup> Women were also afforded a private conversation with the President, who spoke to each woman individually.<sup>72</sup> Judith Sargent Murray described further how women “took their share of tea, Coffee, and Cakes, in their variety- fruits, ices, Lemonade, wines etc etc.”<sup>73</sup> These beverages were picked specifically by Martha Washington as “an intentionally simple ‘republican’ array of refreshments,” further emphasizing the American nature of her receptions.<sup>74</sup> After finishing their drinks and their conversation, women repeated the original ceremony, curtsying to Martha before leaving.<sup>75</sup>

The material culture of Martha Washington’s receptions was consciously chosen and played a part in distinguishing these social events as American. The initial receptions took place in the parlor of the first President’s House in New York City, a three-story brick home on the corner of Cherry and Dover streets.<sup>76</sup> Samuel Osgood and William Duer were selected by

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>71</sup> Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames*, 125-126.

<sup>72</sup> Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1789*, letter, from *Abigail Adams: Letters*: 474.

<sup>73</sup> Judith Sargent Murray, *Judith Sargent Murray to her Mother and Father, August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1790*, letter, from *From Gloucester to Philadelphia in 1790*, ed. Bonnie Hurd Smith (Cambridge: Judith Sargent Murray, 1998): 254.

<sup>74</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 79.

<sup>75</sup> Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1789*, letter, from *Abigail Adams: Letters*: 474.

<sup>76</sup> Patricia Brady, *Martha Washington: An American Life* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2005): 163.

Congress to secure the rental and furnish the home, and for this latter task, they settled on none other than their own wives. Sarah Franklin Robinson wrote in 1789:

Previous to [Washington's] coming Uncle Walter's house on cherry Street was taken for him and every room furnished in the most elegant manner- Aunt [Mary] Osgood & Lady Kitty Duer had the whole management of it- I went the morning before the General's arrival to take a look at it- the best of furniture in every room- and the greatest Quantity of plate and China that I ever saw before- the whole of the first and secondary Story is paperd and the floors Coverd with the richest Kind of Turkey and Wilton Carpets.<sup>77</sup>

Mary Osgood and Kitty Duer were no doubt aware of the significance of decorating this particular home, especially the parlor, for they were creating an incredibly political space that needed to be set apart from the others in the home. As Amy Hudson Henderson writes, "elite families continued to use wood, plaster, marble, and glass to elevate their [parlor] and signal it as a space of refinement."<sup>78</sup> Like Elizabeth Powel's decoration of her salon, the women furnishing the President's House consciously furnished it to be the seat of a new American leader. Sarah Franklin Robinson, in her letter, noted that "the house really did honour to my Aunt and Lady Kitty; they spared no pains nor expense on it."<sup>79</sup> Martha Washington herself commented that "the House...is a very good one and is handsomely furnished all new for the General."<sup>80</sup> Of course, this decoration was not just for George Washington, but aided in Martha's own presentation of a new, American style of governance.

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<sup>77</sup> Sarah Franklin Robinson, *Sarah Franklin Robinson to Catharine Wistar, April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1789*, letter, from *In the Words of Women*, ed. Louise V. North, Janet M. Wedge, and Landa M. Freeman (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011): 296-297.

<sup>78</sup> Henderson, "Furnishing the Republican Court," 226.

<sup>79</sup> Sarah Franklin Robinson. *Sarah Franklin Robinson to Catharine Wistar, April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1789*, letter, from *In the Words of Women*, 296-297.

<sup>80</sup> Martha Washington, *Martha Washington to Fanny Bassett Washington, June 8<sup>th</sup>, 1789*, letter, from *Worthy Partner*, 215-216.

Even the cups and saucers that Martha's guests used at her receptions held political meaning, becoming a part of her performance of American values. In 1796, Martha Washington received a box of china from Andreas Everardus van Braam Houckgeest, the Dutch-American "director of Canton operations for the Dutch East India Company from 1790-1795."<sup>81</sup> Now settled in Philadelphia, van Braam gave Martha "a set of tea china"; surviving today are four caudle cups<sup>82</sup>, seven saucers, a sugar bowl, a 14-inch plate, and four 9-inch plates.<sup>83</sup> The decoration on the service, which may have been for display rather than use, connects Martha with American symbols used throughout the Revolution, setting precedents for popular representations of America. On a surviving caudle cup, her initials are presented on a sunburst surrounded by "a closed circle of chain-links, each containing the name of a state."<sup>84</sup> (Figure 5) These images would have been familiar to elite Americans, for, as Susan Grey Detweiler explains, this arrangement was "printed on factional dollars issued for the Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1776."<sup>85</sup> This linked Martha with the larger context of American leadership. A blue serpent, grasping its tail in its mouth, is seen on the rim of the cup, symbolizing eternity; an image reminiscent of Benjamin Franklin's "Join or Die" cartoon.<sup>86</sup> The motto "decus et tutamen ab illo" is seen on a red ribbon beneath the central sunburst motif, translating as "a glory and defense from it."<sup>87</sup> Detweiler interprets this as referring to "van Braam's sentiments about defensive strength achieved in the union of states," and, like the other motifs, this connects

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<sup>81</sup> Susan Gray Detweiler, *George Washington's Chinaware* (New York: Harry N. Adams, Inc. Publishers, 1982): 151.

<sup>82</sup> With two-handles and a cover, these were used for drinking chocolate.

<sup>83</sup> Detweiler, *George Washington's Chinaware*, 151-158.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

Martha to the new nation. Placing these on display in the President's House, Martha Washington advocated for a strong union and popularized what would become long-lasting American symbols. However, this caudle cup and the other pieces of china also recognized Martha's political importance, casting her as an American symbol herself; a position reinforced by Martha's heightened place in her receptions.



Figure 5- Chinese porcelain chocolate cup and saucer. Porcelain. Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

Martha Washington's receptions set a precedent for American political and social behavior, both drawing on European traditions and pushing for new American styles. The formal entrance, curtsy, and the lemonade might seem like a simple social event, but for Martha, stepping on untrodden ground, it was highly political. Abrams describes how these receptions "were not inconsequential: they allowed women to exercise some level of public power...and often the interactions and conversations held there became 'the crucible in which the ideas of [male] politicians' were tested.'"<sup>88</sup> Martha's contemporaries recognized the values she hoped to communicate in their observation of the ceremony, the discussions they had, and the cups they drank from. Abigail Adams stated that George Washington's presence at these events was done "with a grace dignity & ease, that leaves Royal George far behind him."<sup>89</sup> Eliza Hamilton

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<sup>88</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 13.

<sup>89</sup> Like her prickly husband, Abigail was insistent about her station as the Vice President's Lady, writing to her sister in 1790, "my station is always at the right hand of Mrs W...I find it some times occupied, but

described the levees as “brilliant so far as beauty, fashion, and social distinction...otherwise they were very plain and entirely unostentatious.”<sup>90</sup> The ceremony, the discussions, and the material culture, from fashion to porcelain cups, all aided in the creation of American political culture, meant to be observed and adopted by the elite women who attended the receptions, thus spreading new American styles.

After attending Martha Washington’s receptions, elite women went on to host salons and social events in their own parlors, spreading the Republican Court beyond the President’s House. Political sociability and visiting culture became prevalent in the capital cities, helping to form political alliances among the upper classes, allowing women to express their political opinions to others, and aiding in the creation of a specifically American political culture. Susan Branson writes that “visits provided women with an opportunity to convey their political sentiments to the men who could act on their behalf.”<sup>91</sup> Not only did women pay calls on other women, but legislators frequently called on prominent women, acknowledging their importance to society and politics. William Maclay, a Pennsylvania senator, noted in his diary that on May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1789, “the Pennsylvanians had agreed to call on Mrs. Morris between 10&11...The Gentlemen of Congress have it seems, called on Mrs. Washington & all the Congressional ladies.”<sup>92</sup> On one such occasion, when calling on a Mrs. Bell, William Maclay mentioned that she “took occasion to tell me that Mr. Morris, was not sincerely attached to the Pennsylvania Interest. On that

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on such an occasion the President never fails of Seeing that it is relinquished for me, and having removed Ladies Several times, they have now learnt to rise & give it me, but this between our selves, as all distinction you know is unpopular.”; Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch*, 9<sup>th</sup> August 1789, letter, from *Abigail Adams: Letters*, 474.

<sup>90</sup> Baxter, *A Godchild of Washington*, 224.

<sup>91</sup> Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames*, 131.

<sup>92</sup> William Maclay, *Saturday, May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1789*, journal, *The Diary of William Maclay and Other Notes on Senate Debates*, ed. Kenneth R. Bowling and Helen E. Veit (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988): 60

Subject. That his commercial arrangements were calculated for this place.” Maclay’s statement refers to the debates over the location of the United States capital; this displays that women clearly used their connections to air their grievances and obtain further political information.<sup>93</sup> Eliza Hamilton, Mary White Morris, and Abigail Adams, all notable attendees of Martha Washington’s receptions, hosted their own visiting days.<sup>94</sup> These smaller scale salons perpetuated women’s public political role; as their husbands debated in Congress, these women met in the parlor for intellectual and political conversation. Abigail Adams frequently commented on the visits in her letters to her sister, writing on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1789, “the Principal Ladies who have visited me are the Lady & daughter of the Governour Lady Temple the Countess de Brehim, Mrs Knox & 25 other Ladies many of the Senators, all their Ladies all the Foreign ministers & some of the Reps.”<sup>95</sup> Supporting these visits was the work of paid, indentured, and enslaved servants, who prepared beverages, moved furniture, and collected calling cards on behalf of elite women. These lower-class women engaged in their own, simultaneous visiting culture. Dunbar describes how Ona Judge, Martha Washington’s enslaved maidservant, would have accompanied her mistress on social calls; though Ona “would never have socialized with Mrs. Washington’s friends…she certainly became familiar with the slaves and servants of the nation’s top movers and shakers.”<sup>96</sup> As elite women discussed the moving of the capitol in the parlor, enslaved individuals, such as Ona, retreated to the kitchen to discuss their own interpretation of freedom in the new nation.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> William Maclay, *Sunday, June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1790*, journal, *The Diary of William Maclay and Other Notes on Senate Debates*, 298.

<sup>94</sup> Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames*, 131.

<sup>95</sup> Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, July 12<sup>th</sup>, 1789*, letter, from *Abigail Adams: Letters*, 472.

<sup>96</sup> Dunbar, *Never Caught*, 77.

<sup>97</sup> Jesse J. Holland, *The Invisibles: The Untold Story of African-American Slaves in the White House* (Guilford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016): 48.

This culture of political sociability created important networks, both upper and lower class, that gave women a political voice in the United States.

Amy Hudson Henderson writes that “the women who assumed leading positions in...national society in the 1790s employed their knowledge of a European salon culture to transform their domestic space into intellectual spaces and thereby create an appropriate backdrop for this exceptional, Republican Court society.”<sup>98</sup> Led by Martha Washington, elite women instituted social events that reflected the intertwining of American and European styles. These events were privileged spaces, not open to all, but lower class women still found ways to exert their own voices, forming networks of conversation in the kitchens and outbuildings surrounding elite residences. As the primary venue for these events, the parlor symbolizes these themes; a place of public display and conversation, where women used words and material culture to grapple with issues of American politics and identity.

*“Fixing the Taste of Our Country” in the Dining Room*

Rebecca Lowndes Stoddert had been in Philadelphia for months before she was finally invited to a ball at Mrs. Bingham’s home on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 1800. It was the next step in a formalized ritual of visiting and being visited that Stoddert tried to remain nonchalant about even though she understood the intense social ramifications. It had been a great relief when “Mrs. Bingham [had] at least thought proper to show her painted face here,” not only because “she is of great consequence, in some people’s opinion,” but also because Stoddert now had the ability to see the inside of her home.<sup>99</sup> She had walked outside Mansion House, the Bingham’s grand

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<sup>98</sup> Henderson, “Furnishing the Republican Court,” 113.

<sup>99</sup> Rebecca Lowndes Stoddert, *Rebecca Lowndes Stoddert to her niece, Eliza, January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1799*, letter, from Kate Mason Rowland, “Philadelphia A Century Ago,” *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine* (1898): 804.



Philadelphia home, for months and admired the monstrosity. At 18,000 square feet, it was the largest in Philadelphia, with neoclassical narrative plaques and two bow windows on the façade.<sup>100</sup> Once the day of the ball arrived, Stoddert's interest was instead piqued by the grand dining room.<sup>101</sup> Though Stoddert had her own well-furnished dining room, this was beyond anything; glass chandeliers and mirrors, mahogany chairs, and an imported French dinner service laid out for the countless guests.<sup>102</sup> The room made a marked contrast from the austere furnishings of the First Lady's dining room. While Abigail Adams was determined to entertain simply and frugally, Anne Willing Bingham clearly had a different interpretation of American identity and communicated respectability in a European style. She was also prepared to entertain on a grand scale, gathering all the Philadelphia elite, government officials, and their female relations at her table. In 1792, she and her husband purchased a set of Queen's ware from Liverpool that included "three tureens, six sauce tureens, two salad bowls, twenty-six covered dishes of various sizes, four dozen soup plates, ten dozen plates, and three dozen cheese plates."<sup>103</sup> No one went without a drink, for the Bingham had 206 drinking glasses to serve champagne, lemonade, water, and wine; far from the republican simplicity of Martha Washington's receptions.<sup>104</sup> It must have taken an army of servants to make this meal possible.

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<sup>100</sup> Henderson, "Furnishing the Republican Court," 97-98.

<sup>101</sup> Wendy A. Nicholson, "Making the Private Public: Anne Willing Bingham's Role as a Leader of Philadelphia's Social Elite in the Late Eighteenth Century," Master's thesis, University of Delaware, 1988: 35.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>103</sup> Margaret Brown, "Mr and Mrs William Bingham of Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 61, no. 3 (July 1937): 309.

<sup>104</sup> Nicholson, "Making the Private Public," 37.

The tableware was not the only thing drawing the eye. Spread on the tables was a lush array of food, all displaying Anne's wealth and knowledge of fashionable, multiple course meals.

After an evening of dancing, Stoddert and the other guests tucked into a grand feast:

The only meats I saw or heard of were a turkey, fowls, pheasants, and tongues, the latter the best that I ever tasted, which was the only meat I ate. The dessert [perhaps served on blue-and-gold and pink-and-gold dessert sets] consisted of every thing that one could conceive of except jelly...I never ate better than at Mrs. Bingham's. Plenty of blanc mange, and excellent. Near me were three different sorts of cake; I tasted all, but could eat of only one...take it altogether, it was an agreeable entertainment to me.<sup>105</sup>

Though the rest of Mansion House was decorated in a European style, it was in this lavish dining room that Stoddert could clearly see Anne Willing Bingham's attitude toward European styles of entertaining. While Martha Washington and Abigail Adams sought to reframe European social engagements in a distinctly American style, Anne had "a passion and thirst after all the luxuries of Europe" and felt that the new American nation should be held to European standards.<sup>106</sup> Her love of European styles was not limited to material culture, however, as she greatly admired the political acumen of French women, writing to Thomas Jefferson that they were "more accomplished, and understand the intercourse of society better than in any country...their education is of a higher cast, and by great cultivation they procure a happy variety of genius, which forms their conversation, to please either the fop, or the philosopher."<sup>107</sup> Coded in the fashionable French meal, the imported dinner service, and the Queen's ware was an admiration for European fashions, and perhaps a wish that American women could be as publicly political as their French counterparts.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Robert C. Alberts, *The Golden Voyage: The Life and Times of William Bingham, 1752-1804* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company): 151.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 141.

When the parlors of women during the 1790s became imbued with political meaning, dining rooms were not far behind. Here, women had different materials at their disposal to form their impression of American identity. Political discussions took place, just as in the parlor, thanks to carefully constructed guest lists. New dining protocol and décor impressed upon foreign diplomats, local elite, and government officials the respectability and authority of the United States. Most unique to the dining room was, of course, the food, through which American identity was created with every bite; this food, of course, can be credited to lower class and enslaved cooks, who adapted European and colonial recipes. With these new facets at their disposal, women once again found themselves negotiating the balance between European traditions and American values and setting the foundations of American political culture.

Most important to elite women was being able to seat all their specifically chosen guests at their table, and so dining rooms were constructed and decorated very particularly. Sarah Livingston Jay, who entertained from a home at 8 Broadway in New York City, had two dining rooms, one for family meals and one for entertaining.<sup>108</sup> In 1792, Abigail Adams complained of having to regularly dine “from 16 to 18 and sometimes 20 persons every Wednesday,” usually members of Congress.<sup>109</sup> When Mary Alsop King was abroad with her family in the late 1790s, she purchased a twenty foot long table, but not to be outdone, Martha Washington’s table as First Lady sat more than thirty.<sup>110</sup> Once the dining rooms were large enough to fit the chosen few, they

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<sup>108</sup> Jennifer M. Tobin, “The Livingstons of Liberty Hall: Changes and Restrictions of Gender in Eighteenth-Century America,” PhD, West Virginia University, 2011: 98-99.

<sup>109</sup> Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams, February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1792*, letter, from *Abigail Adams: Letters*, 501.

<sup>110</sup> Kelsey Brow, ““...his dignity should be adorned by his house, but not derived from it”: Rufus King and Consumerism in Post-Revolutionary America,” *SHEAR*, Summer 2018, 4; Lawler, “The President’s House in Philadelphia,” 34-35.

had to be decorated and designed to match the latest styles, communicating the fashionable nature of the new United States. Neoclassical styles were particularly popular, alluding to the classical societies that inspired the American government. Though Sarah Livingston Jay's home does not survive today, it likely included the latest of neoclassical design and decorative molding, perhaps even a narrative frieze on the mantelpiece; this would be similar to other notable families in New York City, further cementing class loyalties. Perhaps she had a rounded extension on her dining room, like Mary Alsop King boasted in her Queens home; not only did this provide more space for guests, but hearkened to classical architectural shapes, an adaptation of the fashionable bow window.<sup>111</sup> Eliza Hamilton hosted guests, including Joseph Bonaparte, in an octagonal room in her home uptown, the Grange, that included doors lined with mirrors, reflecting light back into the dining room; her very own American 'Hall of Mirrors'.<sup>112</sup> The President's House in Philadelphia, the epitome of an American dining room, included similar neoclassical details, which would have aided in Martha's performance of American identity. The room had twelve pilasters, a ceiling of decorative plasterwork, and "a large carpet with a center medallion of the Great Seal of the United States."<sup>113</sup> Elite women used this decoration to set the dining room apart from other rooms in the home as a valued entertainment space, place of intellectual conversation, and one large enough to fit their guests.

Guest lists were not chosen lightly and were used to craft groups of people to discuss certain political policies. Sarah Livingston Jay is famous for her carefully curated dinner lists, described by Jennifer Tobin as "the who's who of the late eighteenth century."<sup>114</sup> Like Martha

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<sup>111</sup> House Tour, King Manor Museum, Jamaica, New York, August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

<sup>112</sup> House Tour, Hamilton Grange National Memorial, New York, New York, August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

<sup>113</sup> Lawler, "The President's House in Philadelphia," 33-35.

<sup>114</sup> Tobin, "The Livingstons of Liberty Hall," 99.

Washington, she tried to avoid any appearance of favoritism, which would obviously reflect poorly with the popular rhetoric of egalitarianism and republican virtues; Martha took this a step further, and she and George Washington avoided attending private dinners hosted by others during his presidency.<sup>115</sup> However, guest lists also allowed women to network to further their own and their family's interests, bringing women in contact with a wide range of individuals. Abigail Adams wrote to her sister, Mary Smith Cranch, of dining with members of the Creek Confederacy, who had come to New York City to negotiate a new treaty with the United States government; she adds that "one of their kings dined here yesterday and after dinner he conferred a Name upon me the meaning of which I do not know."<sup>116</sup> Sarah's surviving dinner lists includes Lady Kitty Alexander and William Duer, New York governor George Clinton, Eliza Hamilton and her husband, and Mary Alsop King and her husband, the infamous Aaron Burr, a host of Livingston relatives, and even the Spanish diplomat Don Diego Maria de Gardoqui.<sup>117</sup> With such a varied, politically involved crowd, it is hard to imagine Sarah Livingston Jay remaining uninvolved in conversation. She was no stranger to this type of political networking, and she "viewed herself as an integral part of the political process."<sup>118</sup> During the campaign for the Constitution, Sarah "frequently held dinner parties, teas, and various entertainments. She

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<sup>115</sup> Brady, *Martha Washington*, 165

<sup>116</sup> Richard Harless, "Native American Policy," George Washington's Mount Vernon, accessed November 13<sup>th</sup> 2019, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/native-american-policy/>; Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1790*, letter, from *Abigail Adams: Letters*, 482-483.

<sup>117</sup> Kitty Alexander's husband was the first Assistant Secretary to the Secretary of the Treasury, Eliza Hamilton was married to the Secretary of the Treasury, and Mary Alsop King was married to a United States Senator; Sarah Livingston Jay, *Dinner Lists*, document, from the John Jay Homestead, *Nina Iselin Collection*, accessed June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019; Don Diego Maria de Gardoqui tried give Sarah Jay gifts, which may have functioned as a recognition of status, but she and her husband decided it was more prudent to return them.; John Jay, *John Jay to Don Diego Gardoqui, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1785 [draft]*, letter, from *Selected Letters of John Jay and Sarah Livingston Jay*, 172.

<sup>118</sup> Tobin, "The Livingstons of Liberty Hall," 102.

invited key persons to the events, created a perfect place for her husband, [Alexander] Hamilton, and sometimes [James] Madison to lobby prominent individuals from those states.”<sup>119</sup> Eliza Hamilton had done, and continued to do, the same. Knowing their guests, women like Sarah and Eliza could maneuver conversations to address their own political opinions, or lobby for their husband’s policies; in the 1780s, it was remarked that “talk at [Sarah’s] dinner table is all of the Constitution.”<sup>120</sup>

With their guest lists set, most women in the 1790s sat down to multiple course meals in the dinner *à la Francaise* style; a form of dining that unfortunately showed a European bent in a period still trying to determine what “American” really meant. Nabby Smith, the only surviving daughter of Abigail Adams, noted “yesterday we dined at Mrs. Jay’s...the dinner was a la Francaise, and exhibited more European taste than I expected to find.”<sup>121</sup> Despite the connotations of foreign luxury and dependence, many Americans still adopted the form, finding it useful to convey their own good taste. The first course “provided a light opening to the meal,” with soup, seafood, and other hors d’oeuvres in covered dishes on hot plates meticulously placed by enslaved footmen.<sup>122</sup> After the “dishes of radishes, olives, small pickles, and more” were enjoyed, servants replaced the tablecloth and the next course came out.<sup>123</sup> This marked the height of the meal, with various meats, “vegetables...some sweet dishes...[and] the ‘made’ dishes- ragouts,

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<sup>119</sup> Tobin, “The Livingstons of Liberty Hall,” 104-105.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>122</sup> Milian, “The Politics of Dinner,” 22; “Dinner with the Jays,” *The Valley Table* (Dec 2005-Feb 2006): 9422-9425.

<sup>123</sup> “Dinner with the Jays,” 9422-9425.

stews, and fricasees.”<sup>124</sup> The last course brought the much-beloved desserts; “fruits, nuts, pastries, petit fours, jellies, custards, and maybe some ices,” closed out the meal.<sup>125</sup>

In between courses, the individuals who made this meal possible made an appearance. Weaving in between guests to take dirty dinnerware, serve dishes, and keep the glasses filled, enslaved and paid servants overheard the networking taking place at the table; information that could be shared with other servants during elite visits. The Washingtons benefited from the services of “fourteen white servants and seven slaves” who made their “frequent, large, and elaborate” dinners possible, while Sarah Livingston Jay herself remarked in one letter that “she could not entertain like this ‘without the excellent help.’”<sup>126</sup> Though these lower class women and men were not invited to sit at the table and engage in conversation, their work enabled the political discussions taking place, and they were keenly aware of the dining ritual taking place. For some of these women, dinner represented a small amount of free time, exempt from their usual duties of dressing and cleaning; during this time, they could gossip amongst themselves, learning from those serving what was being discussed at the table.<sup>127</sup> For Ona Judge, a dinner party would become her freedom. On May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1796, she helped Martha Washington dress in her plain silk for yet another meal with Philadelphia notables, then “left the Washington’s house while they were eating dinner,” and escaped to freedom.<sup>128</sup> Though these women were not invited to sit at the table, they found their own political meaning in the dinner parties that their work facilitated.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Milian, “The Politics of Dinner,” 26; “Dinner with the Jays,” 9422-9425.

<sup>127</sup> Dunbar, *Never Caught*, 110.

<sup>128</sup> Holland, *The Invisibles*, 50.

During the 1790s, as elite women crafted an American identity through discussion, ceremony, and material culture, the dining room became the site of another aspect of identity; food. Previous to the 1790s, Americans relied on European cookbooks, which often neglected a wide range of American ingredients; Amanda Milian comments that “Americans needed cookbooks that were representative of both their cultural distinctiveness and the unique goods contained in their physical reality.”<sup>129</sup> In 1796, Amelia Simmons published *American Cookery*, “the first truly American cookbook,” described as “in its minor sphere, another declaration of American independence.”<sup>130</sup> Here, Simmons helped to define a distinctive American culture, and enabled a host of American women to use food in similar ways. Though Martha Washington’s cookbook included recipes with “a distinctly English flavor,” Pennsylvania Dutch cuisine, like Philadelphia pepper pot, made its way onto her table.<sup>131</sup> Abigail Adams, similarly, served more traditionally American dishes, like “Indian pudding, mutton, veal, peas, fried oysters, cabbage pudding, and gooseberry fool”; besides asserting American identity, however, Adams also took into account the financial strain the Presidency put on her family, and so she served fewer, simpler dishes.<sup>132</sup> However, it is important to note that Martha Washington and Abigail Adams were not the women creating these dishes at the hearth. As Kelley Fanto Deetz wrote of female enslaved cooks in the South, “while the missus may have helped design the menu, or provided some recipes, it was the enslaved cooks who created the meals that made Virginia, and eventually the South, known for its culinary fare and hospitable nature.”<sup>133</sup> The

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<sup>129</sup> Milian, “The Politics of Dinner,” 24.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>133</sup> Kelley Fanto Deetz, “How Enslaved Chefs Helped Shape American Cuisine,” *Smithsonian* (blog), July 20<sup>th</sup> 2018, accessed December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-enslaved-chefs-helped-shape-american-cuisine-180969697/>.



same theme applies to enslaved cooks in New York City and Philadelphia, who integrated African styles of cooking and delivered meals to the tables of the First Lady and other government wives. For these men and women, cooking became a form of resistance; in the words of food historian Michael Twitty, “they took our names, they took our gods, they took our religion but they didn’t take our food.”<sup>134</sup> Though Martha Washington may have compiled her own cookbook, distinguishing a new American style of eating, the creation of these food styles can be ascribed to enslaved cooks, who asserted their African heritage through the dishes they served.

The dishes that food was served on also played a role, and tableware in the dining room was harnessed by women to create a distinctly American style of dining. Dishes and other embellishments were carefully chosen, as women “sought a stylistic balance between pieces that were sufficiently grand to impress foreign dignitaries, yet those that did not convey a royal court culture.”<sup>135</sup> Abigail Adams, for example, owned a silver plateau de dessert and a set of porcelain figurines depicting Minerva, Diana, Apollo, and Mars that may have graced her table during her Wednesday night meals.<sup>136</sup> While they hearkened to the classic societies that inspired the shifts in American government, “[legitimizing] America’s standing as an independent nation” to foreign

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<sup>134</sup> Nina Martyris, “A Black Food Historian Explores His Bittersweet Connection to Robert E. Lee,” NPR, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017, accessed April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2017/09/05/547562682/a-black-food-historian-explores-his-bittersweet-connection-to-robert-e-lee>.

<sup>135</sup> “Neat Simplicity: Presidential Entertaining, Washington Style,” George Washington’s Mount Vernon, accessed November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019, [https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-first-president/presidential-entertaining/?utm\\_source=Newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=Key+to+the+Bastille%2C+Ice+Cream+Recipes%2C+A+Calling+Card+from+Mrs++Washington&utm\\_campaign=MKTG\\_content\\_bas\\_tille7\\_14\\_19](https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-first-president/presidential-entertaining/?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Key+to+the+Bastille%2C+Ice+Cream+Recipes%2C+A+Calling+Card+from+Mrs++Washington&utm_campaign=MKTG_content_bas_tille7_14_19).

<sup>136</sup> David S. Shields and Fredrika J. Teute, “The Court of Abigail Adams,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 35, no. 2 (2015): 232.

diplomats, they were also purchased in Paris, suggesting a foreign influence in a nation trying to set itself apart from the Continent.<sup>137</sup> When the Washingtons moved into their New York City residence, they also sought out similar table decorations, knowing of their popularity in the city, the importance of joining such a visual community, and the classical motifs they would display.<sup>138</sup> Martha and George ended up with seventeen table ornaments for their table. Gouverneur Morris, who helped purchase the items, described them as “three Groups two Vases and twelve figures,” which would ornament a *surtout-de-table*, a mirrored centerpiece made up of seven *plateaux*.<sup>139</sup> One such piece was a large, biscuit-porcelain depiction of “Apollo instructing the Shepherds”; not only hearkening to the classics, but suggesting an idealism of the American agricultural lifestyle.<sup>140</sup> Embodied in these porcelain pieces were “references to the political ideals of ancient Greece and Rome,” which were now reflected in the United States Constitution.<sup>141</sup> Gouverneur Morris, paralleling the thoughts of the elite women, recognized the symbolism of these pieces, writing that they were “of a noble Simplicity, and as they have been fashionable above two thousand years, they stand a fair chance to continue so during our time...I think it of very great importance to fix the taste of our Country properly, and I think your [referring to the Washingtons’] Example will go so very far in that respect.”<sup>142</sup> Just like her actions in her parlor,

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<sup>137</sup> Henderson, “Furnishing the Republican Court,” 318.

<sup>138</sup> Detweiler, *George Washington’s Chinaware*, 107-108.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 111; Morris described the entire set up as “when the whole *Surtout* is to be used for large Companies the large group will be in the middle the two smaller ones at the two Ends- the Vases in the Spaces between the three and the figures distributed along the Edges or rather along the Sides.”

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>141</sup> “Neat Simplicity: Presidential Entertaining, Washington Style,” George Washington’s Mount Vernon, [https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-first-president/presidential-entertaining/?utm\\_source=Newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=Key+to+the+Bastille%2C+Ice+Cream+Recipes%2C+A+Calling+Card+from+Mrs++Washington&utm\\_campaign=MKTG\\_content\\_bas\\_tille7\\_14\\_19](https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-first-president/presidential-entertaining/?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Key+to+the+Bastille%2C+Ice+Cream+Recipes%2C+A+Calling+Card+from+Mrs++Washington&utm_campaign=MKTG_content_bas_tille7_14_19).

<sup>142</sup> Detweiler, *George Washington’s Chinaware*, 115; Jennifer Van Horn reflects on Morris’ choice of *plateau* that he “set a middle path, allowing that republicans needed to make use of refined goods but selecting items that were not so overtly luxurious as to be in danger of overwhelming the purchaser with

and the clothes she wore, Martha Washington's dinnerware decisions as First Lady proved influential, setting trends about dining room style.

Among the Washington's political circle, the impact of their dinnerware choices can be felt. In 1796, when representing the United States abroad, Mary Alsop King and her husband, Rufus, purchased two sets of dinnerware, "purple on white with a gilt edge."<sup>143</sup> Though Mary had a different interpretation, wanting a set that was "a little more ornamented" to gain respect for their country abroad in England, Rufus's set, which resembled the Washingtons' presidential porcelain, won out.<sup>144</sup> Similar to Martha's preference for simple dinnerware, the Kings' sets were "meant to embody republican ideals with [their] cool white porcelain and restrained neoclassicism."<sup>145</sup> Harnessing the symbolism inherent in tableware, elite women dressed their tables to communicate their interpretation of American identity, whether simple and classical or elegant and ornamented.

Like the parlor, the dining room was a female curated public space in the home, but it offered different tools in the creation of American identity and engagement in political machinations. Here, women alluded to the American government with Neoclassical architectural features, decoration, and tableware, setting the dining room up as an intellectual space. Through carefully picked guest lists, women could network and advance political ideas, and were also

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desire."; Jennifer Van Horn, *The Power of Objects in Eighteenth-Century British America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017): 391.

<sup>143</sup> Brow, "Rufus King and Consumerism..." 4-5.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> "Neat Simplicity: Presidential Entertaining, Washington Style," George Washington's Mount Vernon, [https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-first-president/presidential-entertaining/?utm\\_source=Newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=Key+to+the+Bastille%2C+Ice+Cream+Recipes%2C+A+Calling+Card+from+Mrs++Washington&utm\\_campaign=MKTG\\_content\\_bas\\_tille7\\_14\\_19](https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-first-president/presidential-entertaining/?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Key+to+the+Bastille%2C+Ice+Cream+Recipes%2C+A+Calling+Card+from+Mrs++Washington&utm_campaign=MKTG_content_bas_tille7_14_19).

exposed to a wider variety of individuals. The dining room also offered food as an avenue for identity creation, where guests could taste the newest American styles; adapted and cooked by enslaved cooks, who imbued their own meanings into their dishes. Through these facets, the dining room became an incredibly politicized space, where elite women presented guests with new representations of the United States.

### *Conclusion*

The home, in traditional eighteenth-century rhetoric, had always been a feminine space, a domestic sphere. The dining room and parlor, thus, fell under the purview of women, yet these spaces represent a marked shift from the common “domesticity thesis.”<sup>146</sup> Far from private, these rooms were under the control of women and meant for the public eye. Here, elite women in the 1790s found a foothold in the world of politics, creating American identity as their husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers drafted bills in Congress. Through discussion and material culture, women like Martha Washington lobbied for political policies they supported and took stands on what being an American really meant, supported by the work of countless lower class and enslaved women. Stepping onto untrodden ground, all of these women “helped forge the rituals of American democracy,” setting precedent for how the United States functions today.<sup>147</sup>

In late 1790, Martha Washington hosted her first reception in the President’s House in Philadelphia. Standing in the bow window, she could look over a parlor filled with women, discussing the new capital city, the latest news from the Treasury, or the latest bills brought up in Congress. Her “American throne,” the bow window was the perfect blend of European

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<sup>146</sup> Shields and Teute, “The Republican Court and the Historiography of a Women’s Domain in the Public Sphere,” 170.

<sup>147</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 255.

respectability and American virtues, emphasizing her role. All eyes were on her, and every step she took was vitally important to the young country. Here, from her parlor, she was creating an American nation, leading the country just as her husband was.

*Private Lives: Women and Political Identity in the Bedroom*

The sun was barely up when Abigail Adams awoke in her bedroom in the President's House in Philadelphia. She had always tended to wake up early, but in 1797, as First Lady<sup>148</sup>, she found that rising early afforded her precious leisure time. She kept a tight, and public, schedule throughout the day, writing to her sister, Mary Smith Cranch, that "At 8 I breakfast after which until Eleven I attend to my Family arrangements. At that hour I dress for the day. From 12 until two I receive company, sometimes until 3. We dine at that hour...After dinner I usually ride out untill seven."<sup>149</sup> Early morning brought the only time that Abigail was not obligated to anyone else. The hours between 5am and 8am were solely Abigail's, and she usually spent that time in the privacy of her bedroom.

While the room does not exist today, surviving bedrooms and inventories from 1790s Philadelphia can recall how Abigail may have experienced the space.<sup>150</sup> With her love for the written word, a writing desk covered with papers, quills, and ink was Abigail's refuge, where she poured out her personal thoughts on the development of the United States government to her family and friends, her emerging political network.<sup>151</sup> The shelves and drawers of the desk were

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<sup>148</sup> Abigail Adams served as First Lady from March 1797 to March 1801.

<sup>149</sup> Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1797*, letter, from *Abigail Adams: Letters*, ed. Edith Gelles (New York: Literary Classics of the United States): 571.

<sup>150</sup> Some of the items mentioned in this chapter, which can be traced back to the President's House in Philadelphia, survive in Mount Vernon. An advertisement for the auction of Anne Willing Bingham's Mansion House includes a semi-inventory of the home, suggesting the types of materials held in each room; "A Catalogue of the principal articles of furniture and plate," *United States Gazette*, November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1805, from Robert C. Alberts, *The Golden Voyage: The Life and Times of William Bingham, 1752-1804* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969): 467-473.

<sup>151</sup> In one letter to John Adams, Abigail remarked, "There are particular times when I feel such an uneasiness, such a restlessness...my Pen is my only pleasure, and writing to you the composure of my mind."; Diane Jacobs, *Dear Abigail* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2014): 13.

spilling with newspapers, treatises, and local magazines.<sup>152</sup> Across the room, a work table sat; a slight wooden piece with a large fabric bag underneath where she stored sewing and embroidery projects waiting to be sent to her numerous relatives. Not to be forgotten, the marital bed loomed over it all; a signifier of Abigail's relationship with her husband, her closest political ally. While Abigail's bedroom was decorated simply compared to the public rooms downstairs, the politics in this room were no less potent. This space was that of Abigail's personal political development, a place of private thoughts and relationships that had long-reaching consequences.

As a space that wasn't tied up in public display, the bedroom serves as a powerful framework for studying women's private political development. This space represents the private and personal transformation women underwent in the 1790s. The American Revolution left a mark on their lives, not only in the public change of government, but in how women saw themselves and engaged with politics on a personal level. After keeping households afloat and exerting independence and power while their husbands were absent, women developed a new sense of self-confidence. This manifested in a new dynamic to their marriages, as women sought to maintain their agency and control in their relationships.<sup>153</sup> Mary Beth Norton argued that "wartime circumstances had created a generation of women who, like the North Carolinian Elizabeth Steele, described themselves as 'great politician[s].'"<sup>154</sup> In their correspondence, women, both young and old, more frequently engaged in political discourse, and as popular

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<sup>152</sup> From a young age, Abigail's love of books and writing was encouraged; her father, William Smith, opened his library to the rest of the family, and Richard Cranch, who went on to marry her older sister Mary, introduced Abigail, Mary, and Elizabeth to "Enlightenment philosophy, epistolary novels, Milton, Pope, Shakespeare, and also some French."; Jacobs, *Dear Abigail*, 9 and 16.

<sup>153</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1760-1800* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980): 225.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, 171.

rhetoric emphasized the importance of women to the new republic, greater opportunities for education and political involvement opened for them.<sup>155</sup> Women, empowered by their Revolutionary experience, created networks of politically-minded friends and family, sharing concepts of American identity. These developments and changes took place in women's private lives, embodied in the comfort of the bedroom, but ultimately helped drive the wider political culture of the United States.

*The Marital Bed and the "Mutual" Partnerships of the Early American Republic*



Figure 6- The Washington's bedroom in Mount Vernon, Mount Vernon Ladies' Association

The most prominent piece of furniture in the main bedroom of the President's House was a bed. For Martha and George Washington, it was a mahogany bedstead that loomed over the space at six feet wide, six and a half feet long, and seven and a half feet tall.<sup>156</sup> Martha had "caused [it] to be made in Philadelphia," likely to better accommodate her husband, who was

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 228.

<sup>156</sup> "Washington Bedchamber", Mount Vernon Virtual Tour, George Washington's Mount Vernon, accessed February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://virtualtour.mountvernon.org>.



over six feet tall.<sup>157</sup> The two shared the bed throughout Washington's presidency, finding comfort with each other that was often difficult to find outside the walls of this private room. (Figure 6)

Standing firm throughout the tumult of the presidency, the bed represented the Washington's relationship. Colonial Williamsburg's Katharine Pittman, who portrays Martha Washington, describes the couple as having a "very happy and long marriage." Washington was a loving father and husband, Martha the able manager of the household.<sup>158</sup> During the American Revolution, however, their relationship became increasingly politicized, and this continued into Washington's presidency. As she created the role of First Lady, Martha further positioned herself as a visible symbol of her husband's policies and an extension of his hospitality, while continuing to manage the ever-growing household as George engaged in government duties. Jeanne Abrams describes that "long before the development of mass media and the official White House press agent, Martha Washington [and the First Ladies who followed her] served as effective presidential public relations envoys and at times even campaign managers for their husbands, building political capital and a power base through the social realm."<sup>159</sup> This authority was recognized by the public, and Martha was seen as a source of patronage, appealed to for government positions and favors.<sup>160</sup> While this political power was connected to her husband's

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<sup>157</sup> Martha Washington, *The Will of Martha Washington*, document, from "Worthy Partner": *The Papers of Martha Washington*, ed. Joseph A. Fields (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994): 407.

<sup>158</sup> Katharine Pittman, actor-interpreter, *A Public Audience with the First Lady, Martha Washington*, Hennage Auditorium, Williamsburg, February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

<sup>159</sup> Jeanne E. Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic* (New York: New York University Press, 2018): 19.

<sup>160</sup> Throughout Washington's presidency, Martha was approached in the hopes of finding positions or supporting American businesses. In 1792, an anonymous writer asks for thirty dollars on behalf of a young man in difficult circumstances, appealing to her "well known generosity of heart, and charitable disposition." The editors of the Ladies' Magazine in Philadelphia wrote to Martha in 1793 requesting "the pleasure of considering you in future as an encourager and Patron of the Worke.;" *Anonymous to Martha Washington, February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1792*, letter, from *Worthy Partner*, 235; *The Editors of the Ladies' Magazine to Martha Washington, May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1793*, letter, from *Worthy Partner*, 249.

position, it does not discredit the fact that Martha was viewed as having power of her own, and she very well did. As George's "partner in the presidency," she provided the private, personal support that enabled him to complete his presidential duties, and the political aid to further his policies amongst the public.<sup>161</sup>

The First Lady was not the only woman who found herself as a partner in this new, political endeavor. Women who had solely managed businesses, farms, and homesteads in their husband's absence during the Revolution were not willing to give up this new independence in their marriages. Though perhaps not entirely equal, the "republican conception of matrimony" became, in the words of Judith Sargent Murray, that of "mutual esteem, mutual friendship, mutual confidence...mutual forbearance."<sup>162</sup> "Mutual" also extended to politics. Though women had always played a part in hosting guests, they now engaged in political sociability as their husband's partners, hosting political allies, party members, and foreign diplomats. Political life was not always easy, and women were unafraid to speak against the strain of public activity and assert their importance in their marriages. Drawing on their Revolutionary experiences, women in the 1790s navigated a new role in their marriages as partners in politics.

Abigail and John Adams were a couple who embodied a "mutual" nature in the Early American Republic, and no founding relationship has been as well documented as theirs.<sup>163</sup> While John may have viewed himself as the patriarchal head of the household, he recognized Abigail's authority, both as a household manager and a political actor. The two engaged in frequent and

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<sup>161</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 15 and 256.

<sup>162</sup> Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 234-235.

<sup>163</sup> Their letters remained unburned since Abigail died eight years before her husband, and John preserved their correspondence.

copious correspondence, sharing thoughts on their family, the political developments of the United States, and shifts in the wider world. In 1775, John wrote James Warren, whose wife, Mercy Otis Warren, corresponded frequently with Abigail, that while women should be:

excused from the arduous Cares of War and State; I should certainly think that Marcia [referring to Mercy] and Portia [referring to Abigail] ought to be Exceptions, because I have ever ascribed to those Ladies, a Share and no small one neither, in the Conduct of our American Affairs.<sup>164</sup>

As John became increasingly involved in political affairs, particularly in the lead up to the American Revolution, Abigail's support grew ever more important in making his public role possible, and further thrust her into the limelight. Abigail "took over the day-to-day supervision of the children's education," and was a capable household manager, supervising business and construction even during the Adams presidency.<sup>165</sup> In the 1780s, she joined John abroad in Europe, where she stood alongside him in his role as Minister to the Netherlands and Great Britain. She also, as Jeanne Abrams describes, "stood face to face with the heads of Europe, observed European society...and had the opportunity and leisure to attend educational lectures and converse about political and broader philosophical topics with some of the best minds of the era."<sup>166</sup> This experience proved to be incredibly important during Adams' presidency, as she put her own spin on the role of First Lady. Like Martha Washington, Abigail hosted drawing rooms and put a public face to her and her husband's idea of American identity. However, she also pushed further into the public role for women, engaging actively in patronage and distributing information to the newspapers.<sup>167</sup> She was, and was publicly known as, an advisor to her husband,

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<sup>164</sup> John Adams, *John Adams to James Warren, 1775*, letter, from Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 113.

<sup>165</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 111.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid*, 140.

<sup>167</sup> David S. Shields and Fredrika J. Teute. "The Court of Abigail Adams." *Journal of the Early Republic* 35, no. 2 (2015): 228.

sometimes mitigating his heavy-handedness and sometimes supporting it. In her early drawing rooms, she seemed to follow the oft-prescribed role for women in the Early Republic, easing tensions and trying to “mitigate the increasingly political factionalism that surfaced to bolster the Federalist Party position.”<sup>168</sup> However, she could not walk a neutral ground, and she remained intensely loyal to her husband and the Federalist party, writing in 1800, “I must share in what is said reproachfull or malicious of my better half- yet I know his measure are all meant to promote the best interest of his Country.”<sup>169</sup> Adams himself recognized the reliance he had on Abigail, writing soon after his election, “I never wanted your Advice and assistance more in my Life.”<sup>170</sup> Abigail clearly had political prowess of her own, and it was often expressed on behalf of her husband; she was his partner in all the political positions he held and made possible all of his actions during his Presidency.

Political partnerships extended beyond those of the President and First Lady, as a broader swath of elite women explored the political opportunities offered to them by marriage. Cornelia Clinton found herself as the partner in a particularly volatile political marriage. Nineteen at the time of her engagement, she was head over heels in love with Edmond Genêt, the infamous French envoy of the Citizen Genêt affair.<sup>171</sup> While this strengthened her political affiliation to the French leaning Democratic-Republicans, she had not been apolitical before this relationship,

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<sup>168</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 168.

<sup>169</sup> Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1800*, letter, from *Abigail Adams: Letters*, 692.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid*, 159.

<sup>171</sup> Edmond-Charles Genêt, the first ambassador to the United States from France, arrived in Charleston on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1793 and began encouraging “American citizens to outfit privateer ships that could attack British merchants in the Caribbean,” bringing him into conflict with the federal government; Joseph F. Stoltz, “Genêt Affair,” *George Washington’s Mount Vernon*, accessed February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/genet-affair/>.

writing to her fiancée in 1793, “notwithstanding your worth, I do not think I could have been attached to you had you been any thing but a republican.”<sup>172</sup> Through correspondence, she affirmed her role in their relationship, passing on news to both her fiancée and her father, George Clinton, a leading Democratic-Republican in New York. “To avoid being suspected of what I should detest myself for- inconstancy to you,” Cornelia wrote in January 1794, “I send you my father’s speech to the legislature...The aristocrats [likely referring to the Federalist party] are very tame since the good news from France, and the publishing your correspondence with the general government has been of infinite service to you.”<sup>173</sup> Clinton wrote his daughter that same month, “Mr. [unknown name] received only the English account...what do the French say. I presume they give a much more perfect account of their present situation & recent successes?”<sup>174</sup> Cornelia’s actions were not limited to correspondence, and she defended her relationship in the public realm. She wrote on January 5<sup>th</sup>, 1794, of a particularly upsetting visit:

a few days since I was in company with some people who spoke very ill of you & after having got rid of almost all their venom without appearing to pay the least attention to what they said one of the Gentlemen who could not bear my apparent indifference to their discourse rose from his chair and with great vehemence exclaimed that Genêt has more impudence than any Man ever met with- my patience was nearly at an end but I stilled by feelings and...replied that I was perfectly of the Gentlemen’s opinion for Citizen Genêt had even the impertinence to call Mr. Jay and King liars and afterwards to have it proved that they were so.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Cornelia Clinton Genêt, *Cornelia Clinton Genêt to Edmond Genêt, December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1793*, letter, from the New York Historical Society, *Genêt Family Papers* (accessed July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019); Cornelia was lucky in her affections, for politics often came between couples. Catharine Sedgwick wrote later in life that “her good friend Fanny Atwood nearly lost the man of her dreams because her grandfather insisted that her suitor vote for the Democratic party.”; Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007): 89.

<sup>173</sup> Cornelia Clinton Genêt, *Cornelia Clinton Genêt to Edmond Genêt, January 1794*, letter, from the New York Historical Society, *Genêt Family Papers* (accessed July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

<sup>174</sup> George Clinton, *George Clinton to Cornelia Clinton Genêt, January 18<sup>th</sup>, 1794*, letter, from the New York Historical Society, *Genêt Family Papers* (accessed July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

<sup>175</sup> Cornelia Clinton Genêt, *Cornelia Clinton Genêt to Edmond Genêt, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 1794*, letter, from the New York Historical Society, *Genêt Family Papers* (accessed July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

Cornelia left afterwards, her personal attachments and political proclivities clearly stated. “I then took my leave of a company that I am determined not to be seen with again,” La Citoyenne, as she described herself, wrote to her Citoyen, “for your enemies I consider as mine.”<sup>176</sup> Though the Genêt’s marriage is particularly striking, women in New York City and Philadelphia found themselves in similar positions, negotiating political opportunities through their marriages and allying their opinions with their husbands’.

Sarah Livingston Jay found herself in a similarly politicized marriage, and though her husband was never President of the United States, she still faced the strains of public life. Aiding her husband’s successive positions as President of the Continental Congress, ambassador to Spain, Chief Justice of the United States, and Governor of New York, she carefully crafted dinner lists that provided networking and alliance opportunities and frequently updated him as to the latest news, amended with her own political analysis.<sup>177</sup> When John Jay was abroad negotiating the Jay Treaty<sup>178</sup>, she kept track of public response at home, writing:

The situation of affairs in Europe & discontents in Canada lead people here with full confidence to anticipate peace & indeed the extreme prosperity of the Country is such that your mission is much more popular & I have heard from good authority that many who wish’d for war & were disaffected to the public measures are now as desirous of Peace & success to your mission is become an Universal toast.<sup>179</sup>

With all her support, Sarah was understandably disappointed when her husband struggled to uphold his side of their partnership. John could get consumed with public life, focusing more

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> For more information on Sarah’s dinner lists, see the Dining Room section of Chapter One.

<sup>178</sup> This was negotiated between Britain and France and ratified by George Washington in August 1795. For more information: Carol Ebel, “Jay Treaty,” George Washington’s Mount Vernon, accessed April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <http://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/jay-treaty/>.

<sup>179</sup> Sarah Livingston Jay, *Sarah Livingston Jay to John Jay, August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1794*, letter, from *Selected Letters of John Jay and Sarah Livingston Jay*, ed. Landa M. Freeman, Louise V. North, and Janet M. Wedge (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2005): 229-230.

heavily on his government duties than his marriage. In 1794, when John was sent abroad to negotiate what would become the Jay Treaty, she wrote “the Utmost exertion I can make is to be silent. Excuse me if I have not philosophy or patriotism to do more.”<sup>180</sup> Sarah was no stranger to expressing the strain that public life placed on her marriage. Earlier, in the 1770s, Sarah learned of her husband’s appointment as President of the Continental Congress through the newspaper, rather than hearing from him directly. She wrote:

I had the pleasure of finding by the newspaper that you are honor'd with the first office on the Continent...as by your present appointment your personal attendance upon Congress I imagine can't be dispensed with, I am very solicitous to know how long I am still to remain in a state of widowhood...I mean not to influence your conduct for I am convinced that had you consulted me as some men have their wives about public measures, I should not have been Roman matron enough to give you so intirely to the public...if you can spare time to give me...grateful tidings of yourself, you can hardly imagine what happiness you'll confer upon your affecte. Wife.<sup>181</sup>

Sarah was not alone in her insistence that husbands consult their wives about public, political matters. Women in the post-revolutionary period increasingly pushed for recognition and autonomy in their marriages. Lucy Knox even asked her husband, General Henry Knox, that, upon his return, he would “not consider [himself] commander in chief of [his] own house- but be convinced...that there is such a thing as equal command.”<sup>182</sup> This trend continued into the 1790s, and as women claimed an important role in the development of United States politics, they also strove to be fully recognized as partners in their marriages.

After the election of 1808, Charles Cotesworth Pickney, lamenting his loss to James Madison, wrote that he was “beaten by Mr. and Mrs. Madison. I might have had a better chance

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid, 221.

<sup>181</sup> Sarah Livingston Jay, *Sarah Livingston Jay to John Jay, December 28<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup>, 1778*, letter, from the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library, *John Jay Papers*, accessed July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019.

<sup>182</sup> Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001): 11.

had I faced Mr. Madison alone.”<sup>183</sup> Dolley Madison’s role in her husband’s election as President was not a new phenomenon and was developed throughout the 1790s, as marriages became politicized and women became partners rather than subordinates. Embodied in their marital beds was a shifting role for women in their marriages, as they laid claim to their own political identities and built upon the formalized public role that their husbands occupied. Women were supportive, acting in private, behind-the-scenes moments to ensure their husbands’ political stability, yet also quite public, defining their political allegiances and standing by their husbands’ policies. They expressed their own agency as well, recognizing the difficulty brought on by public life and insisting that their voices were heard in their marriages. Though the marital bed was a private piece, meant only for a wife and husband, it embodied a larger post-revolutionary development, as women became political partners to their spouses.

### *Republican Women at the Writing Desk*

Harriet Clark wrote in 1797, “Dr. Price has a new kind of desk and I wish Papa would permit me to have one like it- the lower desk that is a parcel of drawers hid with doors made in reeds to slip back and in the middle a plain door, ‘tis the handsomest thing in the kind I ever saw.”<sup>184</sup> Inspired by the French *bonheur du jour*, these types of ladies’ desks were often decorated in the Neoclassical style, depicting goddesses and allegories of Honor, Temperance, and Justice, which, as Matthew Thurlow notes, reminded “the desk’s user of the behavior, responsibility and

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<sup>183</sup> Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic*, 218.

<sup>184</sup> John and Thomas Seymour, *Tambour Desk*, mahogany, eastern white pine and red oak, 1794-1810, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, <https://emuseum.mfah.org/objects/10272/tambour-desk?ctx=9eb7c34dcdb655ee227b8c2c9af8887abe7a0630&idx=8>.



duty often expected of young women.”<sup>185</sup> However, these desks also provided women with a place to express and store their private thoughts, tucked into the drawers and cabinets under lock and key.



*Figure 7- Martha Washington's writing table, Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.*

One such desk sat in the bedroom of the President's House in Philadelphia, a *bonheur du jour* purchased from the Comte de Moustier and used by Martha Washington. (Figure 7) Amongst its drawers and compartments were spaces to store quills, ink, and other writing necessities, as well as further cabinets for keeping letters. With its marble top, mahogany finish, and brass decoration, it was a fashionable piece to own, yet it was also an incredibly private piece. Only Martha, who held the keys to open the upper cabinet and the writing flap, could access the letters stored inside.<sup>186</sup> Sitting at her writing desk, she could confide her inner thoughts

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<sup>185</sup> Matthew A. Thurlow, "Fit for a Virtuous Woman: A Neoclassical Lady's Writing Desk from Baltimore," The Decorative Arts Trust (blog), March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016, accessed on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020, <http://blog.decorativeartstrust.org/thurlow-forum/>.

<sup>186</sup> Victor-Jean-Gabriel Chavigneau, *Lady's writing table*, mahogany, marble, brass, etc, 1787-1789, George Washington's Mount Vernon, <https://www.mountvernon.org/preservation/collections-holdings/browse-the-museum-collections/object/w-220/#>.

about the larger political situation, as well as her own position as First Lady. A simple piece of furniture, it was a place of refuge for Martha during the trials and tribulations of Washington's presidency, where she could retreat and reach out to family and friends for news and support.

The introduction of ladies' writing desks to the United States in the late eighteenth century recognized the importance of women's words to the new republic, providing women with a specifically feminine "private work [space] for introspection and correspondence."<sup>187</sup> During the Revolution, women had retreated to their bedrooms and their writing desks to engage in military and political discussion, and this type of correspondence did not stop after the war. Recognized as a part of their role as republican women, "independent thinker[s] and patriot[s]," women's engagement in political discourse became part of United States political culture.<sup>188</sup> Correspondence spread beyond this space, forming informal political networks through family and friends that linked the states together. Republican womanhood also saw the further development of women's education, enabling a generation of young, active women to rise. Though a relatively small furniture item, ladies' writing desks encompassed the intellectual and political growth of women in the 1790s.

One woman who spent hours at her writing desk, crafting political correspondence, was Abigail Adams. Sharing political news, accompanied by her own commentary, to her husband, siblings, and children, her letters display the private opinions of many women in the 1790s. No less prescient than the founding fathers themselves, she commented in 1792, "I firmly believe if I

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<sup>187</sup> "For Ladies and Letters: Femininity, Function and Fashion in Neoclassical Ladies' Writing Desks," American Decorative Arts Forum of Northern California, accessed February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, <https://adafca.org/events/for-ladies-and-letters-femininity-function-and-fashion-in-neoclassical-ladies-writing-desks/>.

<sup>188</sup> 11

live Ten years longer, I shall see a devision of the Southern & Northern states, unless more candour & less intrigue, of which I have no hopes, should prevail.”<sup>189</sup> Though not a voting member of Congress, she still kept herself informed and commented upon the state of affairs frequently, writing in 1794, “as I am not in the secrets of the cabinet, I can only judge from what comes to light, and there is sufficient visible to make me very anxious for me Country.”<sup>190</sup> Enclosing her judgments in her correspondence, she then used these letters to form her own political network. Abigail’s sisters, Mary and Elizabeth, often asked her for political updates and shared Abigail’s feelings on the importance of women in political affairs.<sup>191</sup> When John Adams was in Paris in the 1770s, Abigail “kept apprised of the workings of Congress with an extensive correspondence with two informants, John Thaxter and the flirtatious John Lovell.”<sup>192</sup> Through letter writing, Abigail found an avenue into the realm of political discourse, engaging with others to keep updated as to the latest news.

For Abigail, letters were “the only authentic intelligence,” and though she avidly read the New York and Philadelphia newspapers, she looked to correspondence from her political network for the news.<sup>193</sup> However, she soon found a way to meld her private correspondence with the public newspapers, forwarding letters to be published in an attempt to balance the partisan reporting with what she considered the truth.<sup>194</sup> As the relationship between the United States and

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<sup>189</sup> Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1792*, letter, from *Abigail Adams: Letters*, 505.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid*, 515.

<sup>191</sup> “Mary Smith Cranch comments on politics, 1786-87,” *The American Yawp Reader*, accessed February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, <https://www.americanyawp.com/reader/a-new-nation/mary-smith-cranch-comments-on-politics-1786-87/>.

<sup>192</sup> Shields and Teute, “The Court of Abigail Adams,” 233.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid*, 234.

France grew increasingly strained, heightening partisan conflict, she harnessed her network and adopted her new role as the President's "press secretary." Forwarding a letter from her son, Thomas, to her sister, Mary Cranch, she stated, "Make the Chronicle insert it."<sup>195</sup> Sister Mary was often the one Abigail turned to with her print directives, receiving Abigail's requests that "Mr. Cranch...have the inclosed communication publishd, taken from the N York commercial advertiser of Nov'br 2d in the centinel or J Russels paper. I also inclose a paper which contains an answer to Coopers address. If it has not been republished in our papers, it ought to be."<sup>196</sup> At her writing desk, Abigail Adams displayed the importance of women's words to the United States, harnessing her pen to affect the course of national politics.

Women in both capital cities wrote frequently, and female political discourse helped circulate news and create networks throughout the United States. After hosting political salons in her parlor and taking stock of the latest news, Elizabeth Powel retreated to her bedroom to gather her thoughts and write. Like Abigail Adams, Powel's friends and family served as her political network, a group with whom she could analyze the political developments and shifts occurring around her. She provided critical commentary, perhaps not fully acceptable in the drawing room; she wrote to Bushrod Washington in 1785, "our legislature is much a heterogenous body that none of its Acts are to be depended on. We have so far relapsed into the infancy of government that we have not adopted the trite tho no less true maxim that to govern too much is not to govern at all."<sup>197</sup> Political discourse was not limited to married women and drawing room hostesses, however, and young women developed their own political consciousness. Nelly Custis, the

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Elizabeth Powel, *Elizabeth Powel to Bushrod Washington, June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1785*, letter, from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, *Powel Family Papers (Collection 1582)*, accessed May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

teenage granddaughter of the Washingtons, exchanged political news alongside societal gossip and childish notes. Inflamed by the situation with France, she wrote a slightly dramatic letter to close friend Elizabeth Bordley, stating, “were I drowning & a straw only in sight, I would as soon think of trusting to that slender support (which in fact could not save me) as place the smallest dependence upon the stability of the French republican government...Some Frenchmen I esteem highly- but those barbarous democratic murderers, or rather Demons, I shall ever abominate.”<sup>198</sup> The situation with the French often occupied Nelly’s thoughts, and she accepted and reveled in her new mindset. She wrote to Elizabeth, “I am as full patriotic as you can be...& to speak truth, I am becoming an outrageous politician, perfectly federal.”<sup>199</sup> Through their correspondence, a variety of women developed their political opinions, sharing news and analysis with their political networks. Though not as public as voting, these discussions became a crucial part of American political culture.

Though Nelly Custis and Elizabeth Powel wrote to friends, political correspondence for many other women was centered around family members, creating family networks across the United States that defined allegiance to political parties and beliefs. The Nicholsons were one such family, led by Frances Witter and her husband, Commodore James Nicholson. As the women of the family corresponded, they shared news about the shifting political situation. Catherine Nicholson Few, the eldest Nicholson daughter, wrote to her father in 1797, that though she wished her husband would resign his senatorial post, “I am afraid he will not,” citing “the opposition he meets with from the other party [and] the ardent wishes of his own friends, who

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>199</sup> Eleanor Parke Custis, *Eleanor Parke Custis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1798*, letter, from *George Washington’s Beautiful Nelly*, ed. Patricia Brady (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006): 52.

dread seeing the British influence preponderate.”<sup>200</sup> As the Quasi-War loomed, Catherine turned to her sister, Hannah, with her reflections, writing, “Why should the policy of a few interested individuals be permitted to lure on the vengeance of that tremendous Republic?”<sup>201</sup> Staunchly Republican, the daughters’ marriages only strengthened the party’s political network; Catherine’s husband, William Few Jr, was a United States Senator who opposed the creation of the First National Bank, while her sister Hannah married Albert Gallatin, a financial leader of the Democratic-Republicans and later Secretary of the Treasury under Thomas Jefferson. Their familial, and political, loyalty is displayed in their correspondence. The youngest daughter, Jehoiadden Nicholson Chrystie, kept their mother informed as to the popular opinion of sister Hannah Nicholson’s husband, Albert Gallatin: “There is nothing decisive respecting Mr. Gallatin yet I find...Mr. Columbian too has a hint in his paper to this effect that ‘the Senate do not think it constitutional for Mr. G to hold two such profitable appointments at the same time.’”<sup>202</sup> The conversation regarding Albert Gallatin’s positions must have been ongoing, as Jehoiadden went on to write, “I was very glad I had asked Sister the question before I left New York, whether he received the salary for both, and I am now enabled to contradict the malicious insinuation.”<sup>203</sup> In their correspondence, the Nicholson women created their own system of transmitting news, verifying facts, and garnering public opinion.

Women often developed their political opinions and stayed up to date with news by engaging with print culture. The shelves, drawers, and locked cabinets in their writing desks

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<sup>200</sup> Catherine Nicholson Few, *Catherine Nicholson Few to James Nicholson, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1797*, letter, from the New York Historical Society, *Papers of James Nicholson, 1797-1816*, accessed July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

<sup>201</sup> Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 94.

<sup>202</sup> A Chrystie, *A Chrystie to Frances Witter Nicholson, June 26<sup>th</sup>, 1813*, letter, from the New York Historical Society, *Papers of Frances W. Nicholson- 1805 to 1818*, accessed July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

provided enough space for them to store away books and other publications.<sup>204</sup> The Washington family account books from Philadelphia list a purchase of “Riley’s Pocket Library in 6 vol for Mrs Washington,” referring to George Riley’s “Historical Pocket Library”, which boasted “a new, moral and comprehensive system of historical information for the amusement and instruction of the young nobility.”<sup>205</sup> Two years later, another purchase was made “For Ames’s speech for Mrs Washington.”<sup>206</sup> This likely refers to the speech Fisher Ames gave in Congress on April 28<sup>th</sup>, 1796, which “impelled a divided House of Representatives to enact...the provisions necessary to implement the contentious Jay Treaty.”<sup>207</sup> Eliza Hamilton herself owned and annotated copies of the *History of Modern Europe*, a multi-volume set.<sup>208</sup> Margarita Schuyler Van Rensselaer, Eliza’s younger sister, was an avid reader of the newspapers, particularly French papers, and Henriette-Lucie de la Tour du Pin noted:

by reading the papers she had kept informed as to the state of parties in France, the mistakes which had brought on the Revolution, the vices of the higher class of society, and the folly of the medium classes. With an extraordinary perspicuity she had penetrated the causes and the effects of the troubles of our country better than we ourselves.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> By the early 1810s, combination desks and bookcases were designed, as displayed by a Neoclassical inspired piece owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art; *Desk and Bookcase*, mahogany, satinwood, etc, ca. 1811, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/3152?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ft=desk+and+bookcase&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=2>.

<sup>205</sup> *Washington Household Journal, March 1793*, document, from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, *Historical Society of Pennsylvania Collection of George Washington family papers*, accessed May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019; “Riley’s Historical Pocket Library,” viaLibri, accessed February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://www.vialibri.net/years/books/12760754/1790-rileys-historical-pocket-library->.

<sup>206</sup> *Washington Household Journal, March 1793*, document, from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, *Historical Society of Pennsylvania Collection of George Washington family papers*, accessed May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019.

<sup>207</sup> William M. Ferraro, “Mutual Esteem Between George Washington and Fisher Ames (1758-1800),” *Washington Papers* (blog), August 13<sup>th</sup>, 2018, accessed February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://washingtonpapers.org/mutual-esteeem-between-george-washington-and-fisher-ames-1758-1800/>.

<sup>208</sup> House Tour, Hamilton Grange National Memorial, New York, New York, August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

<sup>209</sup> Henrietta-Lucie de la Tour du Pin de Gouvernet, journal, from *In the Words of Women*, ed. Louise V. North, Janet M. Wedge, and Landa M. Freeman (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011): 308.

Women's engagement with print culture was not looked down on, but seen as an example of their new role in the United States. The key to maintaining a successful republic was an educated citizenry, and education often began in the home. Linda Kerber articulated this as Republican Motherhood, where women were educated in order to properly raise virtuous, male citizens, and given power through their influence over their sons. Margaret Nash challenges this perception, arguing that "fiction and essays in popular magazines continually spoke of women's capacity for great influence over men- husbands, suitors, brothers, and sons. It is republican womanhood, far more than motherhood, that educational theorists of the time employed as an argument supporting the need for female education."<sup>210</sup> Benjamin Rush, in his "Thoughts Upon Female Education," emphasized "women's power over the conduct of adult men" amongst his reasons for women to be provided a better education, which he believed should include reading, writing, bookkeeping, geography, history, astronomy, natural philosophy, singing, dancing, and instruction in Christianity."<sup>211</sup> Though men were often connected rhetorically to women's education, this new role afforded women the opportunity of a more developed education and power through their impact on men.

Despite the rhetorical insistence on women's impact on men, young women rarely mentioned this aspect when speaking about their own education. The valedictory addresses given by young graduates of the Young Ladies Academy in Philadelphia, co-founded by Benjamin Rush, paint a picture of women eager to learn for their own gain, often opposed to marriage.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Margaret A. Nash, "Rethinking Republican Motherhood: Benjamin Rush and the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia," *Journal of the Early Republic* 17, no. 2 (1997): 175.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid, 179-180.

<sup>212</sup> The Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia was opened between 1780 and 1787, but was incorporated in 1792, making it "the first incorporated institution for female education in the country."; Ibid, 181.



Eliza Shrupp characterized her learning process as a quest, asking her classmates, “shall not our sex be ambitious of gaining the summit?”<sup>213</sup> “Whatever you pursue, be emulous to excel,” Molly Barker implored her class, reaffirming that women’s education was for their benefit rather than anyone else’s, while Ann Negus was more blunt, reporting that most women would have to “‘resign our liberty’ to husbands who ‘confer in return, hatred and contempt.’”<sup>214</sup> Priscilla Mason, the most outspoken of the valedictory speakers, directly confronted men for limiting women’s possibilities, both educational and occupational: “The Church, the Bar, and the Senate are shut against us. Who shut them? Man; despotic man.”<sup>215</sup> Though not all the speakers from the Young Ladies Academy were as clear on the subject as Mason, these young women re-interpreted Republican womanhood, emphasizing education for their own benefit.

This educational change impacted many young women in New York City and Philadelphia. Theodosia Burr was one student, the daughter of Theodosia Prevost and Aaron Burr. She was tutored by a French émigré, Madame de Senat, and learned the more traditional French, music and dancing, as well as Latin and Greek.<sup>216</sup> She wrote to her half-brother of her Latin studies, “As for Virgil Terence and Claudius...you take a great liberty in calling every author I read my friend however they are so much my friends that I’ll continue the acquaintance for mine not their sake.”<sup>217</sup> Nelly Custis attended Mrs. Graham’s boarding school in New York City, where she learned “spelling and grammar, arithmetic, geography, embroidery, dancing, and

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid, 185.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid, 186.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid, 187.

<sup>216</sup> Richard N. Côté, *Theodosia Burr Alston: Portrait of a Prodigy* (Mount Pleasant: Corinthian Books, 2003): 1618.

<sup>217</sup> Mariam Touba, "The Precocious Theodosia Burr and a Love Letter for 'Citizen Alexis,'" New York Historical Society Museum & Library, blog, February 8th, 2017, accessed July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019, <http://blog.nyhistory.org/the-precocious-theodosia-burr-and-a-love-letter-for-citizen-alexis/>.

French,” and also had a knowledge of Italian, evident in the postscripts in that language found in her letters.<sup>218</sup> Sarah Livingston Jay’s dinner lists may have inspired her daughter Maria to do similar networking to enable her education; Maria wanted to attend the Moravian school in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, but was informed that the school was already at capacity. This did not stop the determined Maria. Her mother wrote:

When Judge Symmes was here, Bethlehem being mentioned in conversation Maria express’d her regret for the impossibility of gaining admission into the school there. The Judge told her that her Aunt, his daughter, & himself were to pass thro’ that place in their way to Cincinnati & that if she would permit him to have the pleasure of introducing her to the directress of the society, he did not doubt being able to procure admission for her as the society were indebted to him for acts of friendship during the war.<sup>219</sup>

Maria was admitted, to her delight, and studied there for two years. She was exposed to a variety of disciplines, including “French, and German languages...Reading, Writing, Composition, and Arithmetic...Musick, painting, and geography, with the rudiments of Astronomy.”<sup>220</sup> Her younger sister, Nancy, soon joined her, supported by their parents. Eager for her daughter to learn, Sarah advised Maria in 1794 to “read as much history as you conveniently can, & let me know what it relates to. Without Geography history will be but a blind study, you will therefore I am sure be attentive to that.”<sup>221</sup> Though Sarah Livingston Jay had received an education as member of an upper-class family, she advocated for her daughter’s further studies, and both her daughters had independence enough to champion their own education.

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<sup>218</sup> Patricia Brady, *Martha Washington: An American Life* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2005): 171; Eleanor Parke Custis, *Eleanor Parke Custis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1797*, letter, from *George Washington’s Beautiful Nelly*, 537.

<sup>219</sup> Sarah Livingston Jay, *Sarah Livingston Jay to John Jay, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1794*, letter, from *Selected Letters of John Jay and Sarah Livingston Jay*, 234.

<sup>220</sup> Judith Sargent Murray, *Judith Sargent Murray to Mrs. E.S., June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1790*, letter, from *From Gloucester to Philadelphia in 1790: Observations, anecdotes, and thoughts from the 18<sup>th</sup>-century letters of Judith Sargent Murray*, ed. Bonnie Hurd Smith (Cambridge: Judith Sargent Murray Society, 1998): 140

<sup>221</sup> Sarah Livingston Jay, *Sarah Livingston Jay to Maria Jay, November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1794*, letter, from *Selected Letters of John Jay and Sarah Livingston Jay*, 243.

Sitting down at a writing desk, a woman in the 1790s found herself embracing a new role as a republican woman. Though too often rhetorically tied to their influence on men, women's political discourse and education were key to the success of the new nation. As they shared news and developed opinions with friends and family, women created political networks that ran alongside more formal government acts. Engaging with print culture and seizing opportunities for education, women reinterpreted republican womanhood to focus on their own personal growth. For women in the 1790s, the writing desk was a place of private development, yet the words crafted here extended far beyond the bedroom.

*Female Friendships, the Work Table, and American Identity*

On July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1790, Martha Washington sat down at her writing desk to draft a thank you to one of her close friends, Eliza Hamilton. The two women had known each other since the Revolution, meeting in Morristown, New Jersey during the winter of 1779-1780; Eliza would later recall that Martha “was always my ideal of a true woman.”<sup>222</sup> Joined by Martha's other companions at the winter encampments, Lucy Knox and Kitty Greene, Eliza and Martha had sewn and mended clothes to support the Continental Army.<sup>223</sup> Now, ten years later, handiwork brought them together again. In her note of thanks, Martha wrote, “Mrs Washington presents her compliments to Mrs Hamilton, and requests she will have the goodness to transmit her best thanks to Mrs church<sup>224</sup> for the token of remembrance so elegantly wrought by the amiable

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<sup>222</sup> Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004): 131

<sup>223</sup> “Martha at the Front,” George Washington's Mount Vernon, accessed February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020. <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/martha-washington/martha-at-the-front/>.

<sup>224</sup> Referring to Eliza Hamilton's elder sister, Angelica Schuyler Church.

donor.”<sup>225</sup> This “token of remembrance” was likely some kind of sewing project, perhaps a work bag or piece of embroidery.<sup>226</sup> Though a small gift, it was the product of Angelica’s hard work and represented the friendship between herself and Martha Washington.



Figure 8-9- Two examples of work tables from the Metropolitan Museum of Art; on the left, worktable (1800-1810) and on the right, work table (1810-1820)

These small symbols of female friendship would have been crafted at work tables, or work stands; furniture pieces that emerged during the same period as the ladies’ writing desk, as Neoclassical styles ushered in a new group of gender-specific furniture. Offering more private storage spaces for women, worktables included a hinged writing surface, drawers to store letters, and an upholstered bag underneath in which to store sewing supplies.<sup>227</sup> (Figure 8-9) The fashionable Anne Willing Bingham had a mahogany work stand of her own, which sat in her bedroom.<sup>228</sup> Perhaps Angelica, who was known on occasion to receive guests in her bedroom, opened up the contents of her work table to her close visitors, displaying the gifts she planned to

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<sup>225</sup> Martha Washington, *Martha Washington to Eliza Hamilton, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1790*, letter, from *Worthy Partner*, 227.

<sup>226</sup> Angelica’s sister engaged in similar gift-giving, and a work bag she made for Anne Greenleaf Cranch, married to a nephew of Abigail Adams, still survives in the Library of Congress; Eliza Hamilton, *Handbag*, Cotton, linen, and silk embroidered bag, Library of Congress, *Cranch Family Papers, 1758-1882*.

<sup>227</sup> Worktable, mahogany, birch, white pine, 1800-1810, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/10001?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ft=worktable&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=3>.

<sup>228</sup> Alberts, *The Golden Voyage: The Life and Times of William Bingham*, 470.

give to close friends, or maybe she instead tucked away those gifts from the prying eyes of the public. Either way, the work table itself can come to symbolize the private space of women in the 1790s, particularly the friendships they had with other women; the physical manifestation of the networks created through correspondence. As politics grew ever more divisive throughout the 1790s, these friendships became more important, from political allies to pillars of support, and provided women with models of behavior and sociability in the new United States.

In the 1790s, women in the capital cities looked to each other to learn the new standards of behavior, sociability, and fashion in the United States. Young women had always looked to their older mentors to learn how to manage households and engage in polite society, relying on these friendships and acquaintances for their education; Cathleene Hellier describes how, after completing their education at home with their mothers, young women engaged in visiting, staying with relatives and friends and finding a variety of female role-models.<sup>229</sup> During the 1790s, this learning took on a particularly political quality. Colonial Williamsburg's Katharine Pittman characterizes this as a form of oral history, and women in the capital cities came to rely on each other for knowledge of how the proper American drawing room was to take place or how to behave as the wife of a senator, a representative, or even the wife of the President.

Martha Washington, in particular, had no manual to follow when pioneering the role of First Lady, so she relied heavily on her close female friends for support and as models of behavior and entertainment. In New York City and Philadelphia, she looked to local, elite women including Sarah Livingston Jay and Elizabeth Willing Powel as models of sociability and hosting. In carefully crafted and incredibly formal letters, Martha reached out for support. "Mrs.

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<sup>229</sup> Cathleene B. Hellier, "The Adolescence of Gentry Girls in Late Eighteenth-Century Virginia," 1.

Washington presents her compliments” began every letter, whether followed up with Mrs. Hamilton, Mrs. Knox, Mrs. Adams, or Mrs. Powel.<sup>230</sup> Lucy Knox, wife of George Washington’s Secretary of War, remained a good friend and helped support Martha’s already busy social schedule with her own receptions.<sup>231</sup> In New York City, Sarah Livingston Jay helped Martha shape the social and political experience through her own dinners. Eliza Hamilton, who shared Martha’s “passionate love of home and domestic life,” often accompanied her to social events or visited her privately; perhaps engaging in sewing projects by the work table.<sup>232</sup> Mary Morris, besides offering her own home on Market Street as the Presidential Mansion in Philadelphia, hosted her own salons to augment Martha’s and attended Martha’s drawing rooms.<sup>233</sup> While the social value of these friendships is notable, the emotional connections between these women should not be discounted. As Eliza Hamilton and her husband recovered from yellow fever in 1793, Martha sent her “prayers and warmest wishes for...recovery,” offering three bottles of wine and “anything that we have that you may want.”<sup>234</sup> Mary Morris wrote Martha after George’s death, offering her sympathies and wishing “that I could be with you...of by such attentions as might assist in leading your mind to the possession of such peace and comfort as is left.”<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Martha Washington, *Martha Washington to Eliza Hamilton August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1789*, letter, from *Worthy Partner*, 218.

<sup>231</sup> Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames*, 133.

<sup>232</sup> Katharine Schuyler Baxter, *A Godchild of Washington, a picture of the past* (New York: F. Tennyson Neely, 1897): 224; Fields, *Worthy Partner*, 218.

<sup>233</sup> Artist Daniel Huntington depicts Mary White Morris at Martha’s side in his famous depiction of Martha’s receptions, though Abigail Adams notoriously preferred that seat as her own.; Daniel Huntington, *The Republican Court (Lady Washington’s Reception Day)*, oil on canvas, 1861, Brooklyn Museum, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/487>.

<sup>234</sup> Martha Washington, *Martha Washington to Eliza Hamilton, September 1793*, letter, from *Worthy Partner*, 253.

<sup>235</sup> Morris, Mary, *Mary Morris to Martha Washington, December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1799*, letter, from *In the Words of Women*, 334.

Friendships among the younger generation of female politicians in New York and Philadelphia were no less important. Nelly Custis, as the granddaughter of the Washingtons, led this charge, befriending the children of legislators and local elite. The Hamilton and Church children were often part of her coterie, attending dancing lessons together.<sup>236</sup> In 1798, Nelly wrote to her closest correspondent, Elizabeth Bordley, of her fanciful, yet strikingly political, ideas to combat the French. “I will enroll you in my corps of independent volunteers...Think child how glorious, to be celebrated as the preservers of our Friends & Country...I have already engaged several of the sisterhood to be ready at a moments warning, I am Commander in Chief of the corps.”<sup>237</sup> Elizabeth would retain her membership in Nelly’s corps for the rest of her life, and the two corresponded and supported each other up until Nelly’s death. Maria Morris, another member of Nelly’s corps, received her support in a difficult time, both politically and personally; in February 1798, Robert Morris, the notable financier, was arrested and sent to debtors’ prison. Mary Morris and her children were devastated, but remained in Philadelphia with the support of friends and family. Nelly Custis confided in Elizabeth:

I love Maria, & sincerely feel for the change herself and her family have experienced...I wish to prove to her what is perfectly true, that no change whatever in her situation could make me for a moment slight her, or diminish in the smallest degree my affection which has lasted nine years...Innate worth is not diminished by loss of wealth.<sup>238</sup>

Nelly’s strong feelings towards the French were apparently matched by her loyalty to her friends, whom she continued to correspond with and supported through difficult situations.

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<sup>236</sup> Tilar J. Mazzeo, *Eliza Hamilton: The Extraordinary Life and Times of the Wife of Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Thorndike Press, 2018): 272.

<sup>237</sup> Eleanor Parke Custis, *Eleanor Parke Custis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1798*, letter, from *In The Words of Women*, 327-328.

<sup>238</sup> Eleanor Parke Custis, *Eleanor Parke Custis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1798*, letter, from *George Washington’s Beautiful Nelly*, 55.

Sitting at their work tables, women in the 1790s crafted small tokens of friendship, handbags and handkerchiefs, which symbolized the bonds between them. Though rarely addressed in historiography, female friendships were incredibly important in the capital cities, as women supported each other through the trials and tribulations of political life. Through friendships, styles of entertainment and behavior passed, encouraging the development of an American identity.

### *Conclusion*

On February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1799, Abigail Adams rose early, as always, to write her husband, who was still in Philadelphia. Rising from her bed, she went to her writing desk, where she drafted a letter by candlelight. There was always news; the appointment of a Mr. Murrey as Minister to France and Federalist uproar was today's business. After the facts, she provided her opinion on the matter, commenting, "Pray am I a good politician?"<sup>239</sup> Though this comment was likely meant in jest, it speaks nonetheless to Abigail's recognition of her personal political identity. This was something to be cultivated in her bedroom, surrounded by the instruments of her private political life; her marital bed and relationship with her husband, her writing desk from which her political thoughts flowed, and her work table, where she could craft gifts for friends whom she relied on when creating a more public American identity.

As a place of privacy, the bedroom represents the personal development that women underwent in the 1790s, as their cultural roles changed after the American Revolution. The belongings in this room enabled personal political development, as they harnessed the rhetoric of

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<sup>239</sup> Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to John Adams, February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1799*, letter, from *Abigail Adams: Letters*, 660-661.



republican womanhood to exert their own autonomy, whether in their marriages or in their education. In their marital partnerships and political networks, women enabled the work that took place in Congress. They served as models of entertainment for friends, perpetuating an American identity through their styles of hosting. In the bedroom, women developed their personal identities as republican women, key members of the new United States.

*On the Streets of New York and Philadelphia: Women's Public Political Activity*

In 1789, John McComb and Cornelius Tiebout created a map of New York City, then the capital of the United States. It displays the complicated streets of the city, not always perfectly parallel, angling down towards Fort George and the Battery at the tip of Manhattan Island. The slips and docks that connected the city to the rest of the world are labelled; Long Island Ferry, Burling Slip, Beekman Slip, Pecks Slip. Most of the blocks are colored in, specific buildings demarcated with small, dark rectangles. The various churches dot the surroundings, alongside the hospital, prison, city, alms house, and the theatre. On Wall Street sits Federal Hall, a distinguished building with columns and a pediment decorated with the American crest; the site of the new United States government.<sup>240</sup>

Eight years later, during Philadelphia's tenure as the United States capital, surveyor and draughtsman John Hills created a map of the city. Structures are similarly defined: dark rectangles on the more orderly streets of Philadelphia. However, Hills provides a wealth of buildings, including churches of various denominations, Quaker meeting houses, jails, hospitals, banks, theatres, markets, and even the circus. Notable amongst these structures are St. Thomas, a Protestant Episcopal church "for the Africans" and the County Court house, a stately brick building now "the Seat of Congress."<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> John McComb and Cornelius Tiebout, *Plan of the City of New York*, map, New York, 1789, from the Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3804n.ar111300/?r=0.208,0.376,0.161,0.119,0> (accessed February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020).

<sup>241</sup> John Hills, *This plan of the city of Philadelphia and its environs (showing the improved parts)*, map, Philadelphia, 1797, from the Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3824p.ct001369/?r=-0.214,-0.069,0.896,0.664,0> (accessed February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020).

These two maps, made by men, appear to show male-dominated landscapes, but these streets were traversed by women all the same. Eighteenth-century churches, courthouses and government buildings were predominantly male led, paralleling Priscilla Mason's words in her valedictory address, but women actively found space of their own in this landscape.<sup>242</sup> Women had always walked these streets, interacting in markets, engaging in commerce and legal battles, and attending church services. Though they expressed their agency in differing ways than men, women had power out in the open and carved out public space of their own.

Public life and activity became increasingly tied to United States political culture throughout the late eighteenth century. The American Revolution had begun not just in the privacy of Independence Hall, but on the streets in popular protests, riots, and boycotts that drew in artisans, laborers, elite, and enslaved individuals.<sup>243</sup> Simon Newman notes that the public resistance that took place before the Revolution "meant that people who were unused to enjoying a direct role in politics could now, whether by direct action and participation, spectatorship, or even calculated inaction, assume a political role."<sup>244</sup> This "out-of-doors" approach to politics included women, who had signed petitions, taken part in boycotts, and supported the troops during the American Revolution; their public activity became intrinsic to the Revolutionary cause. This phenomenon did not end with the Revolution, and public actions, including those of women, became intrinsic to the emerging American identity, especially the increased partisan conflict of the mid-1790s.

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<sup>242</sup> Mason notably stated "The Church, the Bar, and the Senate are shut against us," in her valedictory speech; Margaret A. Nash, "Rethinking Republican Motherhood: Benjamin Rush and the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia." *Journal of the Early Republic* 17, no. 2 (1997): 175.

<sup>243</sup> Simon Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festival Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997): 32.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

Informed by their actions during the American Revolution, women in the 1790s continued to engage with politics on the streets of New York City and Philadelphia. Though they could not engage in the most public political action, voting, the rhetoric of Republican womanhood situated women as central to the political success of the United States as models of virtue, affecting “the spirit of public discourse and the tenor of social relations.”<sup>245</sup> Offered this public forum, women advocated for and embodied feminine political themes to broader audiences. In government buildings, theaters, and on the streets, women engaged in the bitter partisan conflict of the 1790s, asserting their loyalty to either party and their identities as political actors. Recognized as actors on a public stage, women became a key part of the public political culture of the United States.

*Female Politicians in the Galleries: Federal Hall and Congress Hall*



Figure 10- Federal Hall as the first United States Capitol, remodeled by Pierre L'Enfant, Federal Hall.org

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<sup>245</sup> Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007): 125.

There was a crowd gathering on Broad Street, all abuzz with news from Congress and gossip from the social circles, but Judith Sargent Murray maneuvered through them nonetheless, heading towards the large brick building on the intersection with Wall Street. (Figure 10) Decorated with classical motifs, Federal Hall was one of the most notable structures in 1790s New York City, serving as the seat of the United States government.<sup>246</sup> Like the interior of drawing rooms and dining rooms, the building's architecture had been specifically picked to convey an American aesthetic and identity. Murray, like many on the street, recognized the symbolism, writing to her parents:

The Federal structure is magnificently pleasing and sufficiently spacious- Four large pillars in front, support an equal number of columns, with their pediment... Thirteen Stars, the American Arms, crested with the spread eagle, with other insignia in the pediment, tablets over each window, which tablets are filled with the thirteen arrows, surrounded with an olive branch, are among the principal ornaments which emblematically adorn, and beautify the front of the Federal edifice.<sup>247</sup>

Murray's tour did not stop at the exterior. She joined other women inside, wandering past vestibules, the Representatives' room, and the Senate Chamber. As on the building's exterior, there was symbolic decoration; "the letters U.S. surrounded with laurel," decorated the paneling in the Representatives' room, while the Senate Chamber ceiling "presents a sun, and thirteen Stars, which appear in its centre."<sup>248</sup> The Representatives' sessions were open to all, and two galleries were provided; the lower "commonly...filled by gentlemen" and the upper "appropriated to Ladies."<sup>249</sup> Murray "attended the debates of Congress for near four hours" from

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<sup>246</sup> It is located at 1 on both McComb and Tiebout's map.

<sup>247</sup> Judith Sargent Murray, *Judith Sargent Murray to her Mother and Father, May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1790*, letter, from *From Gloucester to Philadelphia in 1790: Observations, anecdotes, and thoughts from the 18<sup>th</sup>-century letters of Judith Sargent Murray*, ed. Bonnie Hurd Smith (Cambridge: Judith Sargent Murray Society, 1998): 95.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid*, 96-97.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid*, 96.

this position. While she had been awe-struck by the decoration, the men of government had a different effect on her:

My reverential feelings considerably abated, as I observed the apparent negligence, of many of the members...gentlemen were walking to, and fro- their hats occasionally on, or off- Reading the News papers- lolling upon their writing stands- picking their nails, biting the heads of their canes, examining the beauty of their shoe Buckles, ogling the Gallery etc etc.<sup>250</sup>

Presented with the men who were leading the United States government, Murray expected a greater level of decorum; manners to benefit the respectable new nation. Their behavior, she found, did not live up to the austerity of the classical façade, and as a Federalist, she may have found their manners lacking in the formality of the British government.<sup>251</sup>

Interestingly, her description of these government men contrasts with her perception of women attending Congressional sessions three months later, well-dressed and formal:

The handsome and commodious seats without the pales, are occupied by a brilliant circle of Ladies, richly habited, and displaying some of the most beautiful faces, which nature when bounteously indulgent, hath to bestow- Mrs Washington, with dignified ease takes her seat- elegant Women compose her train, and, upon either hand, are seated her grandson, and daughter.<sup>252</sup>

It may be surprising to hear that women had a presence in the buildings where Senators and Congressmen voted on the precedent-setting policies during the early days of the United States government. In providing these galleries, the building's designers recognized the place of

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Later in her letter, Murray compares the President's speech to that of a British monarch, from the style of speaking to his "throne, or chair of state", commenting of the United States and England, "we differ essentially in nothing, but in name, and it is possible the time is not far distant which may invest us with royal dignities."; Ibid. Sheila K. Skemp writes in *First Lady of Letters*, her biography of Murray, that "while [Murray] sought to narrow the gap between men and women, she thoroughly agreed with those who thought that too much democracy would lead to a licentious social order," perhaps another reason for her disapproval of the Representatives' behavior; Sheila L. Skemp, *First Lady of Letters: Judith Sargent Murray and the Struggle for Female Independence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009): 96-97.

<sup>252</sup> Judith Sargent Murray, *Judith Sargent Murray to her Mother and Father, August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1790*, letter, from *From Gloucester to Philadelphia in 1790*, 256.

women in the space, and as Murray's letter shows, women were engaged spectators. While their voices were not recognized at meetings, they clearly engaged with the debates occurring below them, whether with awe or disappointment. Besides gaining the latest news first-hand, elite women took note of the newest politicians and their opinions, formulating their guest lists and planning networking based on personal judgements made in the galleries. Sitting in the "room where it happened" women were a part of the action, engaging with the debates that decided the path the United States would take.

The construction of galleries for women lies in a shifting notion of women's role in the United States, embodied in Republican womanhood. Benjamin Rush, who advocated for women's education, also laid out a governmental role for women.<sup>253</sup> Rush argued that "[women] should not only be instructed in the usual branches of female education, but they should be taught the principles of liberty and government," though his reasoning was that "the opinions and conduct of men are often regulated by the women in the most arduous enterprises of life."<sup>254</sup> While many approached women's political involvement from this perspective, women authors argued in different terms, asserting a personal interest in politics. Judith Sargent Murray responded to criticism of "female politicians" thus:

May not a female be so circumstanced, as to render a correct, and even profound knowledge of politicks, the pride and glory of her character...what is a knowledge of politicks, but a capability of distinguishing that which will probably advance the real interest of the Community, and ought a female to become odious, or even to be subject to censure, merely because she happens to understand what would best conduce to the prosperity of her Country? Are not women equally concerned with men in the public weal?<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> For more information on the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia, see chapter two.

<sup>254</sup> Rosemarie Zagari, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother," *American Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1992): 206

<sup>255</sup> Judith Sargent Murray, *Judith Sargent Murray to Sally Wood, November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1800*, letter, from *From Gloucester to Philadelphia in 1790*, 51.

Like the students of the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia, who reinterpreted their education to focus on their personal growth rather than their influence on men, women like Judith Sargent Murray focused on female patriotism and engagement with their country. Republican womanhood, though it offered a rhetorical space for women to be involved in United States politics, was often reframed to emphasize women's personal interest in the actions of their country. Women sitting in the galleries of Congress Hall did not do so just for the men seated there, but to satisfy their own political motivations.



Figure 11 and 12- On left, the gallery in Congress Hall in Philadelphia. On right, the view from the Congress Hall gallery, Independence National Historical Park.

Women eagerly made use of the architectural recognition of their political identities, observing as the United States government coalesced. Rufus Griswold writes that Washington's inauguration was attended by both men and women who crowded around Federal Hall to hear the new President be sworn in on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1789.<sup>256</sup> He quotes a young woman who traveled from Boston to watch the inauguration, commenting, "I have seen him! And though I had been entirely ignorant that he was arrived in the city, I should have known at a glance that it was General Washington...I could fall down on my knees before him and bless him for all the good

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<sup>256</sup> Rufus Griswold, *The Republican court: or, American society in the days of Washington* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1856): 138.



he has done for this country.”<sup>257</sup> Judith Sargent Murray and the “brilliant circle of Ladies” who so impressed her attended Congress for the public ratification of the Treaty of New York between the United States and the Creek tribe.<sup>258</sup> Abigail Adams watched from the gallery as the House of Representatives voted on Alexander Hamilton’s financial policies, writing, “it is thought that tomorrow will be the desisive day with respect to the question, as the vote will be calld for. O this occasion, I am going for the first Time to the House with Mrs. [Tristram] Dalton, Mrs. Jay & Mrs. [Justice William] Cushing to hear the debate.”<sup>259</sup> Alongside other notable women, Abigail used these occasions as “an introduction to many rising politicians”.<sup>260</sup> In 1789, she commented that:

The House is composed of some men of equal talents...the debates will give you the best Idea of them, but there is not a member whose sentiment clash more with my Ideas of things than mr. G---y [likely referring to Elbridge Gerry] he certainly does not comprehend the Great National System...and will assuredly find himself lost amidst Rocks & Sands.<sup>261</sup>

Once the government moved to Philadelphia (Figures 11-12), Abigail Adams and other women continued to attend sessions, sitting in the galleries of Congress Hall. In 1791, she wrote to her son-in-law, William Stephens Smith, “no session has been marked with so many important events, or has been conducted with so much harmony,” listing the “accession of Vermont and Kentucky”, a rise in public credit, and “an increasing confidence in the national government.”<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Judith Sargent Murray, *Judith Sargent Murray to her Mother and Father, August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1790*, letter, from *From Gloucester to Philadelphia in 1790*, 256.

<sup>259</sup> Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1790*, letter, from *In the Words of Women: The Revolutionary War and the Birth of the Nation, 1765-1799*, ed. Louise V. North, Janet M. Wedge, and Landa M. Freeman (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2011): 301.

<sup>260</sup> Jeanne E Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic* (New York: New York University Press, 2018): 145.

<sup>261</sup> Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, July 12<sup>th</sup>, 1789*, letter, from *Abigail Adams: Letters*, ed. Edith Gelles (New York: Library Classics of the United States, Inc., 2016): 469.

<sup>262</sup> Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to William Stephens Smith, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 1791*, letter, from *Abigail Adams: Letters*, ed. Edith Gelles (New York: Library Classics of the United States, Inc., 2016): 497.

At age eleven, Theodosia Burr heard Washington speak in Congress Hall, writing to her half-brother, John Bartow Prevost, in 1794, “I went to hear the presidents speech to both houses of congress, he was dressed in a complete suit of black velvet.”<sup>263</sup> The speech made less of an impression on Theodosia than Abigail, for she commented that she “heard very little and understood less.”<sup>264</sup> Henrietta Liston, attending George Washington’s last address to Congress in December 1796, was more perceptive. She wrote her uncle:

Yesterday tempted me abroad to hear the Presidents Speech, at the opening of Congress, the last He may, probably, ever make in publick.- the Hall was crowded and a prodigious Mob at the door, about twelve oClock Washington entered in full dress...black velvet, sword &c...I happened to sit very near him, and...when He began to read I had an opportunity of seeing the extreme agitation He felt when He mentioned the French.”<sup>265</sup>

Many women used their session attendances to make personal judgements and engage with the latest news. As the wife of the British ambassador, Henrietta Liston was keen to notice anything regarding the relationship between the United States and France. Her perceptive comments on Washington’s behavior likely informed diplomatic relations.

Women’s presence in government buildings, though relatively quiet, was immensely important and recognized as a part of American political culture. Informed by shifting rhetoric regarding women’s political involvement, the creation of galleries allowed for women to attend sessions of the House of Representatives and engage with the development of the United States. Listening in as Congress debated and passed bills, women received political news firsthand,

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<sup>263</sup> *Theodosia Burr to John Bartow Prevost*, November 1794, letter, from Mariam Touba, "The Precocious Theodosia Burr and a Love Letter for 'Citizen Alexis.'" New York Historical Society Museum & Library, blog, February 8th, 2017, accessed March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020. <http://blog.nyhistory.org/the-precocious-theodosia-burr-and-a-love-letter-for-citizen-alexis/>.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> Henrietta Liston, *Henrietta Liston to her uncle, December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1796*, letter, from Bradford Perkins, “A Diplomat’s Wife in Philadelphia: Letters of Henrietta Liston, 1796-1800,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (1954): 606.

reflected (whether positively or negatively) on the direction that America was taking, and observed politicians, gauging who would be most useful in their political network. Though their voices were not privileged in these spaces, their mere presence in the galleries recognized women’s involvement in national politics.

*Women as Political Actresses: The Theatre*

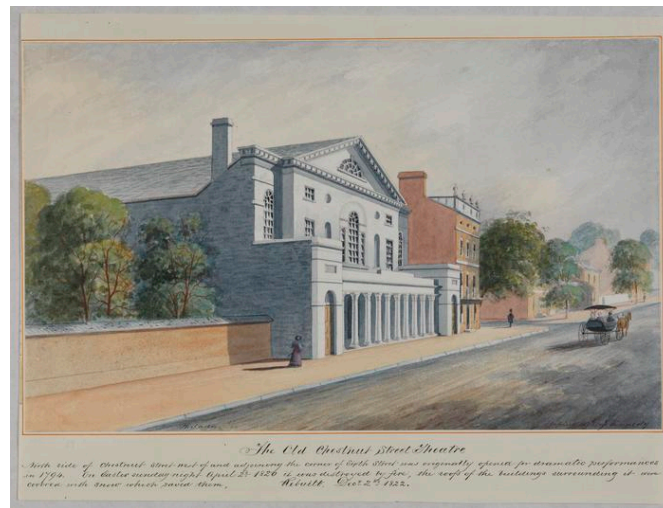


Figure 13- The 'New Theatre' on Chestnut Street, painted by David J. Kennedy, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Across the street from the state house and city hall, which became the seats of United States government during Philadelphia’s tenure as the capital, was the Chestnut Street theatre.<sup>266</sup> It was a popular pastime for women in the city, along with public displays of “natural curiosities,” waxworks, concerts, lectures, dancing assemblies, and even the circus, which sat across Chestnut Street from the theatre.<sup>267</sup> Boasting a Neoclassical façade, with a pediment and colonnade, the theatre sat two thousand and catered to a variety of social classes; gallery seats were 50 cents, while \$1.25 could purchase a private box.<sup>268</sup> (Figure 13) With such a close proximity, topics

<sup>266</sup> This theatre is demarcated on Hills’ map as the “new theatre.”; Hills, *This plan of the city of Philadelphia...* [https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3824p.ct001369/?r=-0.214,-0.069,0.896,0.664,0.](https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3824p.ct001369/?r=-0.214,-0.069,0.896,0.664,0)

<sup>267</sup> Patricia Brady, *Martha Washington: An American Life* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2005): 171-172.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

discussed in Congress often made their way onstage. Theatre has long been used to comment on contemporary political developments, and American theatre in the 1790s was no different, allowing female audience members, actresses, and authors to engage with current events. Here, women's political identity was recognized and accepted as women were called on to vocally support political parties and embody American themes.

As actresses, female political identity was acknowledged as women onstage embodied political ideals and messages. In 1794, Alexandre Placide, a French-born performer, staged the pantomime *American Independence, or the 4<sup>th</sup> July 1776*, in which actresses embodied "nations and political principles"; Susan Branson describes how "Mrs. Placide portrayed America, 'dressed as an Indian, her face covered with a black veil as a token of mourning and grief'...Mrs. Val represented England, in 'grand Court dress'...and Mrs. Douvillier, dressed in white, played Liberty."<sup>269</sup> Actresses delivered poetry, such as Mrs. Marriott's "'Ode to Liberty,'" and even presented eulogies to deceased political figures.<sup>270</sup> British actresses expressed their own political opinions when they came to the United States to perform. Mrs. Melmouth "was scheduled to speak the epilogue" of *Tammany, or the Indian Chief* when she performed in 1793, but refused "because of the patriotic [and anti-British] sentiments contained in it"; American audiences responded by boycotting her shows.<sup>271</sup>

Female authors found the politicized stages in New York City and Philadelphia a perfect venue to express their political opinions. Anne Kemble Hatton, writer of the previously

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<sup>269</sup> Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001): 110.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid, 111.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

mentioned *Tammany, or the Indian Chief*, had created the play “at the instigation of the Tammany Society, a Democratic Republican organization,” while Susanna Rowson’s *Slaves in Algiers* expressed “the freedom of America against the tyranny of foreign powers.”<sup>272</sup> Rowson’s play also commented on the status of women in the 1790s, offering female audience members a depiction of “strong American women standing up for both their sexual and political virtue and hoping for their liberation.”<sup>273</sup> As actresses and authors, women found in the theatres of the United States a public space to express political opinions, quite literally becoming political actors through their words and embodiment of national themes.

Even in the audience, women’s political identities were recognized and called upon. Before and after main performances, national songs were sung, and audience members were expected to respond vocally. “The President’s March” was one such song, played when the namesake entered the theatre, and thus used by audience members to express support or disapproval.<sup>274</sup> Other political figures were similarly recognized; when Edmond Genêt, Cornelia Clinton’s beloved fiancée, attended the theatre in Philadelphia in 1793, the “French political song ‘Ça Ira’” was played.<sup>275</sup> The popularity of this song waxed and waned throughout the 1790s, especially with the advent of the Quasi War in 1798. Henrietta Liston attended the theatre in May 1798, sitting in a box with the Portuguese minister and his wife.<sup>276</sup> She reported:

Nothing could equal the noise and uproar- the Presidents March was played, and called for over and over again, it was sung to, and danced to, some poor Fellow in the Gallery calling for sa ira [referring to ‘Ça Ira’] was threatened to be thrown over.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid, 112.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid, 110.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>276</sup> Henrietta Liston, *Henrietta Liston to her uncle, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1798*, letter, from Perkins, “A Diplomat’s Wife in Philadelphia,” 616.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

Opposite Henrietta's seat was the President's box, where Abigail watched the crowd's reaction. Here, Abigail was visually cast as an American symbol, as the box "was painted with the arms of the United States," and the attendance of the Presidential couple was often advertised in local newspapers.<sup>278</sup> She too noticed the varied reactions to the song choices and recognized the power of songs in a politicized space like the theatre, writing to her sister, "French Tunes have for a long time usurped an uncontrould sway. Since the Change in the publick opinion respecting France, the people began to lose the relish for them, and what had been harmony, now becomes discord."<sup>279</sup> Abigail attended the theatre a week before Henrietta, but her account reads much the same:

Accordingly their had been for several Evenings at the Theatre something like disorder, one party crying out for the Presidents March and Yankee Doodle, whilst Ciera was vociferated from the other. It was hisst off repeatedly.<sup>280</sup>

Like her husband, Abigail's presence at the theatre was recognized. Benjamin Franklin Bache, journalist and founder of the *Aurora*, a Democratic-Republican newspaper, remarked upon Abigail's behavior at the theatre, affirming her role as a public figure. Abigail reflected on his words critically, since his paper quite often criticized her and her husband, writing "Bache says this morning among other impudence that the excellent Lady of the Excellent President, was present, and shed Tears of sensibility upon the occasion. That was a lie. However I should not have been ashamed if it had been so."<sup>281</sup> Though Bache usually provided negative judgements on

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<sup>278</sup> Brady, *Martha Washington: An American Life*, 172.

<sup>279</sup> Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1798*, letter, from *Abigail Adams: Letters*, 619.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 621.

Abigail's behavior, it is notable that her presence at the theatre was noted, especially her reaction to a patriotic and political event.

Women were more generally recognized as theatregoers and political figures in the newspapers. In 1798, Joseph Hopkinson wrote "Hail Columbia," which was first performed at the Chestnut Street Theatre and was described by Abigail Adams as "a National Song."<sup>282</sup> After its inaugural performance, which elicited "the most unbounded applause," the *Gazette of the United States* "extended the wish that 'the ladies will practice the music and accompany the words at its next repetition.'"<sup>283</sup> This request recognized the public role of women in the creation of American identity, inviting them to be a part of political culture.

Attending the theatre and cheering for one song or booing another, women of all classes engaged with political culture and party politics, though their interpretations differed. Martha and George Washington often sent out invitations to their close friends to attend the theatre with them; on November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1789, a note arrived at the Jay's home offering tickets for the theatre for the "Chief Justice of the United States and his lady."<sup>284</sup> However, these formal invitations fail to account for the enslaved individuals who often accompanied elite women and men to the theatre. After attending a production of *The Beaux' Stratagem* at the Southwark Theatre in Philadelphia, the Washingtons gave permission to enslaved maid Ona Judge, her brother Austin, and the

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<sup>282</sup> Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames*, 111; Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch*, 26<sup>th</sup> April, 1798, letter, quoted in *Abigail Adams: Letters*, 619.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> George Washington, *George Washington to JJ at New York, November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1789*, letter, from *Selected Letters of John Jay and Sarah Livingston Jay*, ed. Landa M. Freeman, Louise V. North and Janet M. Wedge (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2005): 189.

President's cook, Hercules, to see the show.<sup>285</sup> While Ona Judge left no account of her views on the show, her interpretation would have varied wildly from Martha or Sarah Jay's. Watching a play like Rowson's *Slaves in Algiers*, Ona Judge may have appreciated the commentary on women's role in society, but also related on a stronger level to the plight of the characters, "men and women captured by Algerian pirates in the North Atlantic."<sup>286</sup> As audience members, enslaved and lower class women could engage publicly, and vocally, at the theatre, expressing their own political opinions.

Though often perceived as mere places of entertainment, the theatres of New York City and Philadelphia offered women in the 1790s a public forum for their political opinions. As women took on the roles of actresses, authors, and audience members, this unique space acknowledged the political identities of women and invited them to add to the national culture. Unlike drawing rooms or parlors, a broader swath of society could engage in the theatre, including lower class and enslaved women, though their interpretations differed from those of elite women. A popular public forum, the theatre offered women a role in American political culture.

*"Marching in Parade": National Holidays, Public Demonstrations, and American Identity*

In 1788, after the ratification of the Constitution, a crowd of five thousand gathered in Philadelphia. A lavish procession marched down the orderly streets of the city, carefully mapped by Hills, to celebrate the new United States government. Ooh's and ahh's filled the air as the star

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<sup>285</sup> Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of their Runaway Slave Ona Judge* (New York: 37 Ink, 2017): 75; Southwark Theatre is the Old Theatre that appears on the John Hills map.

<sup>286</sup> Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames*, 111.



of the parade, a float named the “Federal Edifice”, passed by; supported by “a carriage drawn by ten white horses,” the piece included the initials of the thirteen states, architecture that hearkened to the classics, and a female figure representing Plenty.<sup>287</sup> Following the Federal Edifice were “representatives from more than forty trades and professions, each under the banner of their craft.”<sup>288</sup> Marla Miller notes that while “trades that were generally female...had not been invited to march,” artisanal women likely helped create the banners and decorate the floats corresponding with their crafts.<sup>289</sup> If they did not march in the parade, women of all classes were surely in the audience, engaging with their new government and representations of American identity.

Though, as Simon Newman comments, “the full range and tenor of [women’s] participation are all but lost to us,” women of all classes engaged with political ideas on the streets of New York City and Philadelphia, attending parades, public balls, and demonstrations. By celebrating new holidays or attending protests, women were a part of creating American identity. This was not always a stable process, especially as partisan conflict became more rampant in the mid-1790s. Though Federalists were more likely to acknowledge and engage women as political actors, women of both parties took part in ceremonies and rites reinforcing their partisan status. In the public realm of the 1790s, women were recognized as political beings, active participants in the political life and identity of the United States.

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<sup>287</sup> Marla R. Miller, *Betsy Ross and the Making of America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2010): 287.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

One of the earliest, and perhaps most obvious, forms of public memorial culture that developed in the new United States was the Fourth of July, celebrated with toasts, public readings, and parades. These events counted women amongst the participants; sometimes spectators, but often taking part in the action. Setting precedent for later public holidays and events, Independence Day offered women the opportunity for public speaking. Rosemarie Zagarri explains how this holiday was the purview of both men and women: “according to the citizens of Oswego, New York, ‘[it was] the duty of both sexes equally to participate in [the day’s] joys.’”<sup>290</sup> Women took this opportunity for oration to highlight individuals and themes they supported. While some women asserted the perspective of Republican motherhood, focusing on the power of women in teaching their sons to be proper citizens, others were more revolutionary.<sup>291</sup> A New England “Lady” delivering an oration in 1800 criticized the “current notions of freedom” in the United States, calling “let the wise and pious but concede an equality between the sexes...I aspire to nothing more than the just rank...that equality of talents, of genius, of morals, as well as intellectual worth, which, by evident traits, does exist between the sexes.”<sup>292</sup> Toasts, though a shorter form of public speaking than oration, also gave women the chance to express feminine political ideals. In York, Pennsylvania, women toasted “the Day,” Washington, “The Constituted Authorities,” and “The Rights of Women.”<sup>293</sup> Zagarri argues that this was not a clearly defined concept, which “opened the phrase up to multiple meanings and interpretations.”<sup>294</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft applied the masculine concept of natural rights, adopted

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<sup>290</sup> Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 71.

<sup>291</sup> On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1799, a female orator from Norwich, Connecticut stated “as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters we may all be important, teach[ing] our little boys, the inestimable value of Freedom, how to blend and harmonize the natural and social rights of man.”; Ibid, 73.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>293</sup> Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street*, 107.

<sup>294</sup> Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 48.

by Revolutionary America from John Locke, to women in her 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*; Zagari suggests that this “implied that their rights might well extend to the political realm,” perhaps even equal to the political rights offered to men.<sup>295</sup> Like the New England “Lady,” this toast to “Rights” could also suggest a call for women’s equality alongside men. Presented with the opportunity for public oration on the Fourth of July, women called for the recognition of their political identities, emphasizing notable women and feminine rights in the context of symbolic American language.

Besides the Fourth of July, women helped to popularize George Washington’s birthday as a national holiday, and used it as an event to display patriotism and loyalty to the President. For a country seeking a national identity, supporting the cult of Washington that emerged after the Revolution became a popular choice, even if celebrations of his birthday drew on the British tradition of celebrating the monarch’s birthday. Women of all classes appropriated this event for republican means, helping to organize balls, parades, assemblies, and feasts to honor the hero of the American Revolution, and now President of the United States. They turned out in droves, their very presence cementing the importance of the day; Newman notes that four to five hundred women and men “attended a ball hosted by Philadelphia’s City Dancing Assembly on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1793”, while one hundred and fifty attended a similar ball two years later.<sup>296</sup> These celebrations were not reserved for the elite, however. Elizabeth Drinker, noticing the “crowd with lighted candles” and “drum and fife” processing past her Philadelphia home, described it as “a little mob fashion.”<sup>297</sup> Drinker could be alluding, though judgmentally, to the presence of lower

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>296</sup> Newman, *Parades and Politics of the Street*, 66-67.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid, 66.

class individuals at the celebration, suggesting that laboring women also engaged with national identity formation.

As on Independence Day, women harnessed toasts on George Washington's birthday to salute notable women and feminine political ideals. In Newburyport, Massachusetts, women saluted Martha Washington, drank to the hope that "the fair patriots of America never fail their independence which nature equally dispenses," and lastly drank to Marie-Charlotte Corday, the French woman who assassinated Jean-Paul Marat.<sup>298</sup> The women from Newburyport reframed typically masculine patriotic language, stating "may every Columbian daughter...be ready to sacrifice their life to liberty."<sup>299</sup> Zagarrri quips that this takes patriotism far beyond Republican Motherhood, instead suggesting women's contribution to an ongoing American revolution could reach far beyond boycotts and protests. In these toasts, women reframed typically masculine patriotic language to emphasize their own political identities. Though celebrating Washington's birthday, women took the opportunity of a public forum to instead celebrate his wife, other patriotic women, and assert their role in American political matters.

Just as Washington's birth became a place for women to engage with American identity, his death also became a way to publicly display patriotism. Newman comments that "women's participation was particularly important, and many middling and upper class women found themselves with more room in the public realm than they had ever been accorded when the great man was alive."<sup>300</sup> Abigail Adams, then the First Lady, led the country's mourning with politicized garments; she wrote to her sister that "I shall not have occasion now for any thing but

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid, 69.

Black, until Spring. Then I shall put on half mourning.”<sup>301</sup> Already political, her receptions found new meaning; a space for public display of grief and patriotism. One public drawing room was attended by “upwards of a hundred ladies, and near as many gentlemen...all in mourning.”<sup>302</sup> Women throughout the United States expressed their American identity by wearing mourning, donning black ribbons, armbands, caps, fans, gloves, and more.<sup>303</sup> These women, despite their individual partisan loyalties, came together to commemorate Washington’s contributions to the United States, cementing his position as an American icon.<sup>304</sup> Hundreds of women in New York City and Philadelphia attended memorial services, flooding the streets of both cities. Yet, not all women were completely comfortable with the public mourning. Abigail Adams commented, “I think sufficient has been done to express the gratefull feelings of a people towards the Character of even a Washington. The danger is, least the enthusiastic disposition of some should proceed too far.”<sup>305</sup> Though she led the country in mourning, Abigail recognized the dangers of such continued memorialization and idealization, to American political culture.

Despite the unifying nature of national holidays, women engaged in the partisan conflicts that accompanied such events as well. Women attached themselves to both parties, but Federalists were much more comfortable with reaching out to women directly, while Democratic-Republicans tended to exclude women from public gatherings, favoring equality for

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<sup>301</sup> Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1799*, letter, from *Abigail Adams: Letters*, 671.

<sup>302</sup> Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, December 30<sup>th</sup>, 1799*, letter, from *Abigail Adams: Letters*, 673.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>304</sup> Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street*, 69.

<sup>305</sup> Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, December 30<sup>th</sup>, 1799*, letter, from *Abigail Adams: Letters*, 673.

all white males.<sup>306</sup> A Fourth of July gathering at Dickinson College illustrates this phenomenon. Celebrations were split down party lines, and while the Democratic-Republicans offered a toast to “The Fair,” the Federalists toasted to “the ladies who this day honored our party with their presence. May we ever continue to deserve their favours.”<sup>307</sup> As Newman notes, toasts directed to women display that they were viewed to have a role in the political process, even if it was supporting rather than leading.<sup>308</sup> While Democratic-Republicans occasionally acknowledged women at their holidays and rallies, preferring a “marginal, passive patriotism for women”, the Federalists were much more likely to call directly on women to accomplish their political goals.<sup>309</sup>

Federalist women found in national holidays and political gatherings a public stage accessed through their party, where they were recognized as political actors. Women had no trouble using this public forum and harnessed their words and bodies to support their chosen party. Sarah Cox displayed the party leanings of Washington’s birthday in a 1797 letter, writing, “The common topic of conversation here is the Birth night, which is next Wednesday...Mrs Dr Smith has come to go although she is quite lame with the rheumatism, but you know what a good Federalist she is.”<sup>310</sup> Sarah even characterized her dance, humorously, as a patriotic act: “I danced one pair [of shoes] nearly out at the last Assembly and I am sure if I could do that when it had nothing to do with the President, what shall I do when I have his presence to inspire me.”<sup>311</sup> Federalist women in Princeton supported their party by wearing “the American cockade,” and

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<sup>306</sup> Rosemarie Zagari, “Gender and the First Party System,” in *Federalists Reconsidered*, ed. Doron Ben-Atar and Barbara B. Oberg (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998): 119.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid, 118.

<sup>308</sup> Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street*, 66.

<sup>309</sup> Zagari, “Gender and the First Party System,” 125.

<sup>310</sup> Katharine Diane Lee, “The Young Women Here Enjoy a Liberty’: Philadelphia Women and the Public Sphere, 1760s-1840s.” PhD, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2016: 311.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

Catherine Sedgwick reminisced later in her life that she and her friends “wore gold eagle broaches...to show their loyalty to Federalism.”<sup>312</sup> In contrast to the tri-colored cockade popularized by the French, Federalist women adopted black silk cockades as a symbol of their party.<sup>313</sup> Through these public displays of partisan loyalty, Federalist women supported their party and became enmeshed in the political conflict of the 1790s.

The honoring of militia units was a Federalist tradition involving women that became part of Fourth of July celebrations, increasingly popular as an all-out war with France threatened. These rites allowed women a public way to engage with the military and support Federalist political policies. Ceremonial occasions, they followed a set pattern; “a militia company chose a particular woman (often the wife of the militia captain or another prominent, and politically supportive, female) to present the company standard,” often accompanied with a speech.<sup>314</sup> In 1797, the First City Troop of Cavalry asked Elizabeth Powel, one of the most notable hostesses in Philadelphia, if she would present them with a standard. She excused herself from giving it in person, writing rather formulaically about the “timidity natural to her sex” as well as her “period of life.”<sup>315</sup> However, she still presented the troops with a flag “as an Evidence of her confidence in their Valour and Patriotism,” characterizing herself as a patriotic authority.<sup>316</sup> Newman describes how these rites “provided women with the means to publicly condone the patriotic stance of their menfolk,” as well as support the Adams administration’s foreign policy. Engaging in these

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<sup>312</sup> Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street*, 107; Kate Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011): 223.

<sup>313</sup> Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street*, 156; Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames*, 83.

<sup>314</sup> Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames*, 83.

<sup>315</sup> Elizabeth Powel. *Elizabeth Powel to Captain Dunlap, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 1797*, letter, from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, *Powel Family Papers (Collection 1582)* (accessed May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*

presentations also linked women's political activity with the military actions of men, like the Newburyport women "ready to sacrifice their life to liberty."<sup>317</sup> When presenting a needlework emblem to MacPherson's Blues, a battalion of Philadelphia volunteers commanded by William Macpherson, Sally Duane "impressed upon the assembly her contribution to their cause by likening her 'art' of needlework to the militia's 'art' of war."<sup>318</sup> By presenting militia standards, women linked themselves to the military actions of the Federalist party.

While Democratic-Republican men tended to be hesitant about female engagement in politics, the public actions of Democratic-Republican leaning women cannot be discounted. Like their Federalist counterparts, they were political actors engaging in public holidays and demonstrations, advocating for their own version of American identity. Zagarri describes an Independence Day celebration "in Caldwell, New Jersey, a Republican stronghold, [where] citizens cheered as 'sixteen young ladies uniformed in white with garlands in their hats' marched in parade, 'bearing the Cap of Liberty, enwreathed in laurel, and all fingering *Columbia*, in concert with the German flute."<sup>319</sup> Often, Democratic-Republican demonstrations drew on French traditions, due to the party's French leanings. A "Grand Festival dedicated to Reason and Truth" held in Paris was imitated in Philadelphia in 1794, including "'maidens dressed in white and tri-color costumes' [surrounding] an altar of liberty."<sup>320</sup> Certain French styles, adopted by Democratic-Republican and French allied women, became politicized. Republican women took

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<sup>317</sup> Newman, *Parades and Politics of the Street*, 68.

<sup>318</sup> William Macpherson, *William Macpherson to George Washington, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1789*, letter, from Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-02-02-0118>, accessed March 29th, 2020; Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames*, 84.

<sup>319</sup> Rosemarie Zagarri, "Women and Party Conflict in the Early Republic," in *Beyond the Founders*, ed. Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004): 111.

<sup>320</sup> Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames*, 1.



to wearing Phrygian, or liberty, caps, “an ancient symbol of freedom.”<sup>321</sup> While Federalist women wore black cockades, Republican women of all classes wore “revolutionary red, white, and blue” on the streets.<sup>322</sup> Susan Branson argues that it was “wives and relatives of the hundreds of sailors in [Philadelphia]” who popularized this cockade, showing that lower class women were just as engaged as the elite in the partisan conflicts of the day. Though Democratic-Republican men were hesitant to directly recognize women as political actors, Republican women were incredibly engaged, drawing on French traditions in their creation of American identity.

Catherine Sedgwick, reflecting on her youth in the 1790s later in life, wrote, “I now look almost unbelieving of my own recollections, at the general diffusion of political prejudices of those times. No age nor sex was exempt from them.”<sup>323</sup> As women engaged with national holidays and public demonstrations, they stepped into the messy, public partisan conflict that arose over the path of the United States, political divisions, international alliances, and the nature of American identity. While leaving their mark on American politics and culture, women also found holidays and partisan ceremonies offered them a public forum to express their opinions and embody political ideas. Given a public stage, women reframed traditional, masculine symbols and statements of patriotism, calling for their own female models of patriotism and asserting their own rights as Americans.

### *Conclusion*

The 1789 and 1797 maps of New York City and Philadelphia, displaying both cities’ crowded streets, churches, theatres, and government halls, may have been created by men, but

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<sup>321</sup> Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 86.

<sup>322</sup> Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames*, 71.

<sup>323</sup> Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 115.

they show spaces of feminine engagement. Women did not solely accomplish political goals in the home, but created their own public political identity on the city streets. Empowered by their own actions during the American Revolution and the rhetoric of Republican womanhood, women expanded their role, using their public forum to assert women's equality, natural, and political rights in the new United States. Though women may not have had the most direct form of political action, the vote, they took part in parades, funeral processions, birthday parties, theatrical performances, congressional sessions and ceremonies where they set forth their ideas of American identity and government action. In many ways, their political identities were recognized and accepted, whether in toasts, in calls to action by political parties, in newspapers, or in galleries that acknowledged their presence in a masculine government structure.

Women were political beings, that is clear. They lived politics in the home, hosting drawing rooms and creating American visuals through the dinnerware in their dining rooms, as well as inviting politics into their bedrooms through their close relationships, continuing education, and correspondence networks. Perhaps the most revolutionary, however, is the presence of women "out of doors," on the streets of New York City and Philadelphia, navigating through public spaces to express their political opinions.

## *Conclusion*

In 1805, Mercy Otis Warren sat comfortably at the writing desk in her bedroom, reminiscing on the American Revolution. She was nearly done with her three-volume account of the past forty years, a *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*. Poured out on the pages were her recollections: the Stamp Act, boycotts, riots, battles, Congressional sessions, all described with her able pen and political acumen. She reflected now on more current events. “The United States of America have now a fair experiment of a republican system to make for themselves,” she wrote. Warren also noted a hope for the new country: “The sword now sheathed, the army dismissed, a wise, energetic government established and organized, it is to be hoped that many generations will pass away...before America again becomes a theatre of war.”<sup>324</sup> About 200 years later, Jeanne Abrams concludes her own reflections on this formative period by stating, “the republican experiment was not only a male enterprise.”<sup>325</sup> Women were part of this period of intense change, engaging in discussions, performances, arguments, correspondence, relationships, receptions, parties, parades, and conflicts out of which grew the United States of America.

While the changes the American Revolution brought to the lives of women may not have been all-encompassing, as they were not offered the vote and were not considered on equal terms with men, women of the 1790s carved out a political identity and a voice from shifts in gender expectations, education, and popular rhetoric. They adapted their own roles, using their traditional positions as hostesses and household managers to create a political culture in their

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<sup>324</sup> Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*, book, from *In the Words of Women*, ed. Louise V. North, Janet M. Wedge, and Landa M. Freeman (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011): 336.

<sup>325</sup> Jeanne Abrams, *First Ladies of the Republic* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2005): 253.

dining rooms and parlors, the Republican Court. Using revolutionary rhetoric, they spoke out about their identity and equality, and took part in the mess of partisan conflict alongside men. As Susan Branson writes, “in the two decades that followed the [Revolution], women explored cultural and political possibilities, and in the process claimed for themselves a greater presence in the public sphere and a close connection to the course of the nation.”<sup>326</sup> Concepts of space did not limit them, and they were political actors both in the privacy of their bedrooms and on the streets of New York and Philadelphia. Women in the 1790s did not sit back and let a country form around them. They actively engaged in politics in many forms, making the United States what it is today and setting a precedent for women to speak out and engage with their country.

If the tour of the Grange that I attended on that sunny August day is any sign, women’s involvement in the republican experiment has not been fully accepted and understood; so, what next? Space is key, both in the recognition that women had access to a variety of spaces, rather than just the domestic realm, but also the interpretive use that physical spaces from the eighteenth century offer in understanding women’s political activity. As seen throughout this paper, women used their physical surroundings, the items they owned and wore, to engage with politics. Rather than letting these points rest on the page, I hope that this paper provides a guide for how to interpret dining rooms, bedrooms, even theatres and city streets to discuss the impact of women on the creation of a new country. The Grange may have briefly been the home of the former Treasury Secretary, but it was also a space where Eliza Hamilton visualized and considered concepts of American identity, a space where her own political identity thrived. It is

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<sup>326</sup> Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001): 10.

time for women to finally be given a space of their own in our retelling of the Early American Republic.

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## *Figures*

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9. Attributed to the workshop of Duncan Phyfe. Work Table. Mahogany, etc. 1810-1820. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo by Tessa Payer.
10. City Hall Becomes Federal Hall. <https://federalhall.org/history-timeline/?v=7516fd43adaa>.
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