Women and the Economy during the American Revolution

Boycotting

By the 1700's, Colonial America began to change. As the British continued to tax the colonists, resistance grew against them. The Colonists started to revolt. When more taxes were imposed on tea, the boycott of tea and the Boston Tea Party followed. Women, although they were not on the ship, assisted immensely in the boycott by not buying tea (-non-consumption). If tea was not purchased, the British would not make any money at all. Women hoped that this would change the British’s taxation on tea.

Many women also protested the price of tea and coffee, demanding that the price be lowered. As coffee and tea became scarce, merchants began to raise the prices unfairly.

Look at the primary and secondary sources provided below, including documents and stories from this historical era, to see how women participated in boycotts:

Secondary Source

One Story of Protest: Dramatic Moment Boston Women Protest

On a warm Boston afternoon in July 1777, Thomas Boylston stood at the door of his warehouse staring grimly at the crowd of determined women filling the street. Some gripped wheelbarrows or stood beside carts, others wearing fine silk held umbrellas against the afternoon sun. Most were women in clean homespun, plain but neat. Squarely in front stood Mrs. Colter, who when the crowd became silent said politely but firmly, “We know you have coffee Mr. Boylston. Give it over to us at the Committee’s price and we’ll be pleased to pay.”

“On your way! You’ll not be having my coffee at such prices. It’s mine bought and paid for. Who’s this so called Committee of Patriots to be telling me what I can and cannot sell and for how much? My business is trade—buying and selling. The goods are mine. There are plenty of folks with no stomach for war, but possessing a taste for coffee and the silver to satisfy it.”

Mrs. Colter replied, “Mr. Boylston, the only hope for us is sharing. The soldiers need coffee and we need ours. There being so little going around, surely we must all look to help each other. We won’t have you bleeding and squeezing decent folks. Give us the keys and we’ll divide the goods fairly and pay what’s right.”

Trembling with fear and rage, Boylston edged back through the door. But a large framed woman standing next to Mrs. Colter saw this movement. Before he could slam the
door, she stepped forward, seized him by his collar, and heaved the little man into a cart. Boylston’s eyes got round as saucers and nearly popped from his head; he opened and closed his mouth like a fish, not making a sound; sweat glistened on his face.

Lying on his back staring up from the cart, Boylston found himself surrounded by a ring of women glaring down at him. Slowly he reached into his vest and drew out his keys. As Mrs. Colter took them, someone tipped the cart, dumping Boylston into the street. Boylston scrambled through the crowd. His retreating backside made an irresistible target for the slaps and kicks of women long tired of his arrogance and greed.

The rest of the women swept into the warehouse, found the hidden coffee, divided it into the carts, and left. Throughout this spectacle men stood at the edge of the crowd. Many smiled at Boylston’s fate, but they kept quiet. Clearly, the women were not inclined to be teased, and the watching men were not quite sure they should be cheered. The war had changed Boston, but crowds of unaccompanied women taking public action was not a sight most men welcomed. Men depended on the support of women, but did not want them to forget their “proper” roles as wives and mothers.

**Primary Source from the Library of Congress**

![A Revolutionary Broadside, 1770.](image)

**William Jackson, an Importer; at the Brazen Head, North Side of the Town-House, and Opposite the Town-Pump, in Corn-hill, Boston.**

*It is desired that the Sons and Daughters of Liberty, would not buy any one thing of him, for in so doing they will bring Disgrace upon themselves, and their Posterity, for ever and ever, Amen.*

**When was this written?**

When was this written?

**Who published it?**

Who published it?

**What does it say?**

What does it say?

**What is the purpose of the notice?**

What is the purpose of the notice?
The Petition from the Ladies of Edenton,

We, the Ladys of Edenton do hereby solemnly Engage not to Conform to the Pernicious Custom of Drinking Tea. Or that we the above said Ladys will not promote ye wear of any Manufacture from England until such time that all Acts which tend to Enslave this our Native Country shall be repealed.

October, 1774

The ‘Edenton Tea Party’ took place in the North Carolina town of Edenton in October 1774. Fifty-one respectable women, led by a Mrs. Penelope Baker, the wife of a local merchant, wrote and signed a formal resolution, or petition, promising to boycott British imported tea and manufactured goods, until such time as the coercive legislation, taxation without representation, which Parliament had enacted against the colonies, was repealed.

The colonists then decided to send copies of the petition to London, apparently believing that an all-female petition would demonstrate the strength of colonial feeling and shock the British government into action.

Unfortunately the plan backfired badly. The ladies declaration, which was reproduced in full in the English newspaper, the Morning Chronicle of 31st January 1775, was greeted with laughter and ridicule from the British press and London’s satirists.

This wonderful and extremely rare print refers to the so-called ‘Edenton Tea Party’. It was produced by an English satirist, Philip Dawes, to ridicule the American women. Learn more about this print at: http://b-womeninamericanhistory18.blogspot.com/2009/09women-tea-parties-revolution.html

1. In your own words, what does the petition written by the women say?

2. Look closely at the print. How does Phillip Dawes portray the American Women? What else do you see and why?
Boycotting Continued

Women also took up the “Homespun Movement.” They played a major role in this method of defiance by denouncing silks, satins, and other luxuries in favor of homespun clothing generally made in spinning and quilting bees. Weaving their own flax into cloth or spinning wool into yarn, was time consuming and a difficult process. After the yarn was spun, it still had to be woven into cloth. From there, the woven cloth was sewn into clothing.

When the women colonists stopped purchasing cloth and made their own clothing and even the men’s uniforms for war, it sent strong message of unity against the British oppression.

Thus, women helped with the non-importation and non-consumption of British goods. These actions by women became an important factor in the American resistance movement against the British. The British Empire could no longer count on the money and trade from its American colonies.

Look at the sequence on the right. What do you see and infer from the pictures?
On the Home Front: Household Duties

While women were allowed only a limited public role, they were neither passive nor unimportant. Eighteenth-century women ran households and raised children. Being a good wife required an array of skills that are no longer connected to household management. In addition to cooking and cleaning, women butchered fowl they had raised, smoked meat, made cheese from the milk they had taken from the cow, sewed clothes from the cloth they had spun, made soap, and preserved vegetables they had grown. Moreover, limited technology meant that many of these chores, like laundry, were back-wrenching, tiresome, all-day jobs involving heavy hauling and firm muscles. Other jobs, like sewing, required handiness.

Although 18th century women were barred from becoming merchants or leaders in the colony, they were still expected to manage the household economy. The importance of women became increasingly apparent to both men and women as the colonies struggled to secure their independence. During the Revolution, America could no longer rely on the British for their clothing. Some skills regarded as feminine, like spinning, became more widely appreciated. Without spinning, there would be no clothes for the soldiers or anyone for that matter.

When the war began, some women used this opportunity to demonstrate their capacity to assume responsibilities regarded as male. For instance, many women took charge of family farms, carrying out every task from planning what, when, and how much to plant, to marketing the surplus harvest. Historians have noted that during the war, in their letters to husbands, women often changed from writing “your farm” to “our farm.”

Martha Moore Ballard (1735-1812)

Life was often harsh for the New England settlers during the 18th-century, especially for women who generally didn’t have a say in many aspects of the male-driven community. Women of that time were rarely known or spoken about, but without them, America would never have survived. One of these women, an American midwife and diarist, was Martha Moore Ballard.

Born in Oxford, Massachusetts in 1735 to an illiterate mother, Martha took it upon herself to learn to read and write from her brother and an uncle - college graduates from Harvard and Yale (Martin 118). She was not allowed to go to school. Through their help and schooling Martha was able to keep track of family finances as well as maintain a diary (1785-1812) of her work, which is later understood as the one of the only physical pieces of evidence of her existence and contribution to history. As several physicians in the Moore
family passed down their knowledge of medicine to Martha, she decided to move to rural Maine and practice midwifery, which is assisting in childbirth and sickness.

Because women in this era were expected to get married and have children, Martha became "part of a network of wives, mothers, friends, and neighbors" whose domestic duties put them in charge of most local health care. Not only did Martha bury the dead, prescribe medications, and nurse the sick back to health during her 77 years, but she also delivered 816 babies during 1785-1812, earning her enormous respect in her community, which is a lot to say for a woman in the revolutionary time period.

Martha’s husband was a land surveyor and rarely at home. Her sons left for war and left the farm. Only her 2 daughters and Martha could take care of the farm, mend fences, cook, and spin, weave and make clothing. Meanwhile, Martha also was a midwife and sometimes was up all night helping deliver babies or helping sick villagers.

**Example from Martha Ballard’s Diary**

*Martha Ballard’s Diary, November 14 - 21, 1807*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Entry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Clear Part of yᵉ day. I have been at home, done various kinds of work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Clear and Cold. mr Ballard &amp; Cyrus to meeting, I have been at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Clear part of yᵉ day. mr Ballard been to mend mrs Farewels Barn. Cyrus got Some wood. I have got Some apples into yᵉ Sellar, pared Some. Lucy Came here at 9h Evng.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Cloudy. I have Cut apples for Sause. mrs Brooks here to Spin Thread. I have knit, Lucy spun. Dolly Lambd &amp; Sally Bald Sleep [here].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>A Severe Storm of Snow, hail &amp; wind. mr Balld workt at Banking hous. the little girls went to Son Jonas after Breakfast. I have Stewed my apples &amp; Scolt my pickls and knit Some. Lucy help¹ about hous &amp; Spun Some, hembed me a hankercf &amp; made a night Cap. raind this aft² &amp; Evng. I have been Sewing , doing hous work &amp; knitting. Lucy mending. Shee hemed 2 Callico handkeriefs &amp; 2 Cottin ones &amp; made</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ help
² raind
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Entry</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>me a night Cap. mr Balld Been to the Settlement, was at Son Lambards. they Sent me Beef. he Carried them &amp; Ephm _ [Bush ϭ apples] Each</td>
<td>at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Cloudy. I have been at home, Brewd and did hous wk &amp; knit Some. Lucy twisted hoes yⁿ.</td>
<td>at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Clear part of ye day. Lucy washt. I have done hous wk, Bakt. mrs Smith Supt here. mr Ballard been to the Settlement, he boᵗ _ lb Tea, a bottle of Stotans Elixᵗ. funeral of John Pedrick.</td>
<td>at home. mrs Smilh here, Lucy went home with her. [Funrʰ] mr Pedrick.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>