

Women in Wartime in Early America, 1754–1815



Meeting Between Laura Secord and Lieut. Fitzgibbon, June 1813

Eliza Wilkinson to a female friend, 1782:

“The men say we have no business with [politics], it is not in our sphere! I won't have it thought that because we are the weaker sex as to *bodily* strength, my dear, we are capable of nothing more than minding the dairy, visiting the poultryhouse, and all such domestic concerns.... They won't even allow us the liberty of thought, and that is all I want....”

“To The King’s Most Excellent Majesty” by Phillis Wheatley, 1768:

“YOUR subjects hope, dread Sire--
The crown upon your brows may flourish long,
And that your arm may in your God be strong!
O may your sceptre num'rous nations sway,
And all with love and readiness obey!
But how shall we the British king reward!
Rule thou in peace, our father, and our lord!
Midst the remembrance of thy favours past,
The meanest peasants most admire the last
May George, beloved by all the nations round,
Live with heav'ns choicest constant blessings crown'd!
Great God, direct, and guard him from on high,
And from his head let ev'ry evil fly!
And may each clime with equal gladness see
A monarch's smile can set his subjects free!”



Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776:

“I wish you would ever write me a Letter half as long as I write you; and tell me if you may where your Fleet are gone? What sort of Defence Virginia can make against our common Enemy? Whether it is so situated as to make an able Defence?

...Do not you want to see Boston; I am fearfull of the small pox, or I should have been in before this time. I got Mr. Crane to go to our House and see what state it was in. I find it has been occupied by one of the Doctors of a Regiment, very dirty, but no other damage has been done to it. The few things which were left in it are all gone. Cranch has the key which he never delivered up. I have wrote to him for it and am determind to get it cleand as soon as possible and shut it up. I look

upon it a new acquisition of property, a property which one month ago I did not value at a single Shilling, and could with pleasure have seen it in flames.

The Town in General is left in a better state than we expected, more owing to a precipitate flight than any Regard to the inhabitants, tho some individuals discovered a sense of honour and justice and have left the rent of the Houses in which they were, for the owners and the furniture unhurt, or if damaged sufficient to make it good.

Others have committed abominable Ravages. The Mansion House of your President is safe and the furniture unhurt whilst both the House and Furniture of the Solicitor General have fallen a prey to their own merciless party. Surely the very Fiends feel a Reverential awe for Virtue and patriotism, whilst they Detest the paricide and traitor.

I feel very differently at the approach of spring to what I did a month ago. We knew not then whether we could plant or sow with safety, whether when we had toiled we could reap the fruits of our own industry, whether we could rest in our own Cottages, or whether we should not be driven from the sea coasts to seek shelter in the wilderness, but now we feel as if we might sit under our own vine and eat the good of the land.”

From Dolley Payne Madison to Anna Cutts, 23 August 1814:

“Dear Sister

My husband left me yesterday mornng. to join Gen. Winder. He enquired anxiously whether I had courage, or firmness to remain in the President's house until his return, on the morrow, or succeeding day, and on my assurance that I had no fear but for him and the success of our army, he left me, beseeching me to take care of myself, and of the cabinet papers, public and private. I have

since recd. two despatches from him, written with a pencil; the last is alarming, because he desires I should be ready at a moment's warning to enter my carriage and leave the city; that the enemy seemed stronger than had been reported, and that it might happen that they would reach the city, with intention to destroy it. ...I am accordingly ready; I have pressed as many cabinet papers into trunks as to fill one carriage; our private property must be sacrificed, as it is impossible to procure wagons for its transportation. I am determined not to go myself until I see Mr Madison safe, and he can accompany me, as I hear of much hostility towards him....

Wednesday mornng., twelve o'clock. Since sunrise I have been turning my spyglass in every direction and watching with unwearied anxiety, hoping to discern the approach of my dear husband and his friends, but, alas, I can descry only groups of military wandering in all directions, as if there was a lack of arms, or of spirit to fight for their own firesides!

Three O'clock. Will you believe it, my Sister? We have had a battle or skirmish near Bladensburg, and I am still here within sound of the cannon! Mr. Madison comes not; may God protect him! Two messengers covered with dust, come to bid me fly; but I wait for him.... At this late hour a wagon has been procured, I have had it filled with the plate and most valuable portable articles belonging to the house; whether it will reach its destination; the Bank of Maryland, or fall into the hands of British soldiery, events must determine.

Our kind friend, Mr. Carroll, has come to hasten my departure, and is in a very bad humor with me because I insist on waiting until the large picture of Gen. Washington is secured, and it requires to be unscrewed from the wall. This process was found too tedious for these perilous moments; I have ordered the frame to be broken, and the canvass taken out it is done, and the precious portrait placed in the hands of two gentlemen of New York, for safe keeping. And now, dear sister, I must leave this house, or the retreating army will make me a prisoner in it, by filling up the road I am directed to take. When I shall again write you, or where I shall be tomorrow, I cannot tell!!”



Books referenced:

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Ray Raphael's *A People's History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence* (2002)

Alfred Young's *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier* (2005)

Film & television clips shown:

"1776" © 1972, "The Last of the Mohicans" © 1992, "The Patriot" © 2000, and "The Swamp Fox" © 1959

Websites utilized:

The Origins of Liberty Rhetoric, 1770s-1820s --

<http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/americanstudies/lavender/origins.html>

Biography and 41 Poems of Phillis Wheatley -- <http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/Phillis-Wheatley>

Spy Letters of the American Revolution -- <http://www.si.umich.edu/spies/>

The Adams Family Papers -- <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/>

The Dolley Madison Project -- <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/madison/index.html>

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<http://cdmyers.info>