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LESSONS OF RESILIENCE FROM OUR FOUNDING MOTHERS: AN EXAMINATION OF WOMEN FROM 1776 TO 1830

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ABSTRACT

The role of women in American society during its first 50 years (1776-1830) varied. Women, however, built and maintained the Republic but were not granted access to the Academy (Nash, 2005, Kerber, 1997). At the threshold of the Revolutionary War, women served not only their home, family, and husbands, they began to serve the broader country. In the first third of the 19th century, white women of wealth engaged in political acts of service and in acts of disruption (Kerber, 1997). The rest of this paper examines how women leaders of early America laid the foundation for women's access to chartered institutions of higher education and the influences of this foundation. I assert that the women of 1776-1830, through their resilience and what I have coined the capacity- social capital-finance framework, paved a path for the women to come (e.g., Catherine Beecher, Mary Lyon, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells). Through historical research, I explore the philosophical underpinnings of 1776 through 1830 and explain women's capacity, their social capital, and the eventual access to their own money. I also apply this framework to current day standards.

INTRODUCTION

From 1776-1800, the Republican Era, women engaged in acts of political service and attended to their families; they encompassed what Nash (2005) describes as “Republican Motherhood”. From 1800-1830, the Old Time Era, women built social capital and began to earn their own money to create demand for their inclusion in American Higher Education. Enslaved by white supremacy, black women (and men) gave their lives and their families lives to build the economy of the Republic: an economy based on enslavement, torture, and captivity (Wilder, 2013). Black women, like Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, engaged in acts of survival by dismantling the system of enslavement. Once free, Truth and Tubman engaged alongside wealthy white women toward educational quality for all women. Truth and Tubman laid the groundwork for Ida B. Wells, Mary McLeod Bethune (founder of Bethune-Cookman University) and Mary

Church Terrell to continue acts of resistance for the goal of inclusive educational opportunities. This story must be told, however, due to systemic oppression, I found historical research of mostly white women from 1776-1830.

CULTURAL OVERVIEW OF 1776-1830

On July 2, 1776, the conceptual idea of a democratic nation was installed. Fifty-six men, representing all thirteen colonies, signed the Declaration of Independence. A blood investment declared the United States of America independent from British control. Though united as patriots, those affixing their names to this document could have been charged with treason and hanged. These men having the support of each other sent an unequivocal message of strength: to come after one was to come after all. Affixing one's name was an act of conscience. Even more stunning than was the singular inclusion of a woman on this birth certificate. To widely distribute their message, the men of the Continental Congress went to a respected printer in Baltimore Maryland: Mary Katharine Goddard. Goddard typeset the Declaration of Independence and affixed her name: "Baltimore, in Maryland: Printed by Mary Katharine Goddard" (Declaration of Independence, 1777). She, the lone woman, put her neck on the line (Roberts, 2017).

Goddard was not the only woman engaged in political acts during America's first 50 years. Many of these stories have been lost to history. The United States' founding fathers (e.g., Benjamin Rush, John Witherspoon, Benjamin Franklin) held divergent views on educating women in the newly established Republic (Kerber, 1997). The wives of these men had varying levels of influence. Abigail Adams may be the most well-known influencer. While separated due to his travels, John sought Abigail's advice on pending political decisions. Abigail supplied in epistle: "I long to hear that you have declared an independency. And, by the way, in the new code of laws...I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors." (A. Adams, 1776) Through Abigail's continued urging and prolific writing, John's position towards women's education changed over time (Norton, 1980). This change was influenced by the political underpinnings of the day as well as changing perspectives of the role of women in the new republic.

Though the United States was separate from the rule of the British Crown, French and English philosophers still heavily influenced the new Republic. Three primary perspectives emerged: women lacked capacity, women had capacity, society benefits from women's participation. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a French social philosopher, argued that women lacked intellectual capacity. John Locke, Rousseau's English counterpart advanced an Enlightenment perspective of rationally. Locke argued that women must be permitted to use the rational thought biologically given to them. Nicolas de Condorcet, another French philosopher, directly contradicted Rousseau and advanced Locke's position: the more rational the government the more improved its status of women (Kerber, 1997; Nash, 2005). Contemporaneously to Locke, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in England. In 1792, the Philadelphia

Ladys Magazine published extensive excerpts of *Vindication* for wide American consumption. A radical inclusion, especially as the editors of *Ladys* were men (Kerber, 1997). Though women's roles in broader society were beginning to expand, the trope of the "Republican Mother" persisted. Politics during this era required compromise, and it seems women's education was a bargaining chip.

At the turn of the 19th century, 20 institutions of higher education granted degrees. All of them to men. Religious affiliation provided funding, clear values of educating a learned clergy and an elite class of men which filled a need in the newly established United States (Thelin, 2011). Entrepreneurs and knowledgeable speculators leveraged political will and favors to establish colleges that educated their specific population. At the end of the 18th century and turn of the 19th century, some women were able to attend newly founded schools for young ladies (e.g., Brown's Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia in Pennsylvania, 1787), female academies (e.g., Hillsborough Academy in North Carolina, 1801), and female seminaries (e.g., Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in Massachusetts, in 1835). These schools/academies/seminaries were not chartered, nor were they as financially supported as those who enrolled men (Nash, 2005).

However, as needs change, so does education. One example of this change was the legislative interest, and a subsequent call for essays, to support a National University. Rush argued in his essay, *Of the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic*, for a National University. Higher education provided the essential foundation for future American patriots. This, according to Rush, could only be done through a strong religious foundation centered in the New Testament (Rush, 1798). Rush advanced an argument that women must be educated to serve, so long as this service was dutiful.

I beg pardon for having delayed so long to say anything ...of education proper for women in a republic. I am sensible that they must concur in all our plans of education for young men ... they should not only be instructed in the usual branches of female education, but they should be taught the principles of liberty and government; and the obligations of patriotism should be inculcated upon them. (Rush, 1798/1947, pp 95-96.)

In "Rethinking Republican Motherhood" Nash (1997) scrutinized Rush's essays, public speeches, and trusteeship of the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia. Nash concluded that historians have overemphasized of concept of "Republican Motherhood." By closely reading Rush's original text, Rush advanced the perspective that educating children was the quintessential function of mothers. Rush did not say, though, that motherhood was the most important duty of women (Nash, 1997). By using Rush's own words and Nash's analysis, social support existed during the Republican and Old-Time Era to advance women's access to higher education.

CAPACITY

As Rush's ideas were circulated, a growing cadre of women (and men) skillfully, deliberately, and purposefully created demand for widening access of higher education to women

through highlighting women's capacity. In 1799, Anne Randall, provided a crack to Rush's argument through asserting that women's access to education was at the basis of their humanity: "Let me ask this plain and rational question is not woman a human being." (Nash, 2005) At the turn of the century as these thinkers were sparring, white women of an affluent social class demonstrated their capacity through writing, organizing social groups to support other women, drawing maps, and typesetting (Kerber, 1997; Nash, 2005, Boylan, 2002; Hale 1819). Clearly, women had capacity.

However, like today, the consequences for straying too far from the accepted norm had consequences (Norton, 1980). One such consequence was public condemnation. Sara Hale, a writer during the late 18th century, testified to the City of New York Common Council that "a women's place was in the home; not writing to congressmen." (Hale, 1819) Particularly condemning language from a woman who wielded power with her pen.

Judith Sargent Murray, the American contemporary to Mary Wollstonecraft, wrote the *Gleaner* essays from 1792-1794 (Nash, 2005). Murray's writings, though more conservative than Wollstonecraft but more liberal than American standards of the day, were initially published under a masculine identity, then under female identities, and finally under Murray's own name. A close read of Murray's numerous *nom de plumes* illustrated a need to imbue a male identity to achieve broader access. Murray knew Hale was not alone in her perspective; Murray calculated her risks carefully. *Gleaner* was widely read, not only by her peers but by leaders of the day including President Adams.

Where Judith Sargent Murray's writings and advocacy were broad, Elizabeth Steele, a North Carolina tavern keeper, were narrow. Both were important. During the War for Independence, Steele "read Thomas Paine, followed the progress of troops and diplomacy, and lent gold and silver to the Continental Army." (Kierner, 1998, p. 119). The view of women's intellectual capacity and educational opportunities were changing, though still many barriers were present on where women could use their capacity. Priscilla Mason, a student who gave the salutary oration at Poor's Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia, noted this discrepancy. "Where shall we find a theatre for the display of them? The Church, the Bar, and the Senate are shut against us." (Mason, 1793, pp. 92-93.) Though women in the Republican and Old-Time Era had broader social access than their predecessors, they had not yet gained access to decision-making bodies (Kerber, 1997). As a response, women began to build strong social relationships with other women and partner with men to create social change.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Isabella Marshall Graham, Joanna Graham Bethune, and Elizabeth Seton (the eventual name sake of Seton Hall University) were contemporaries who worked tirelessly to advance girls' education, establish charitable women's organizations, and to broaden the role of girls and women in the late 1700's and early 1800's. Graham, Bethune, and Seton were of affluent social status and

well-connected to political leaders of the time (Boylan, 2002). After enduring numerous tragedies, Isabella Graham, an educator in Scotland, immigrated to the United States in 1789 with her children. The Graham family received sponsorship through the Presbyterian church, specifically by John Witherspoon. John Witherspoon, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, financed Isabella Graham and her family while he was the sixth president of the College of New Jersey, present day Princeton University (Boylan, 2002). Immediately after her arrival to the United States, Graham opened a school for girls that taught English grammar, writing, arithmetic, and geography (along with sewing, art, and music). Graham's daughters, however, were not granted access to the College of New Jersey under Witherspoon's leadership.

Isabella and Joanna Graham established the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children in 1797. The mother and daughter team partnered with Elizabeth Seton and politicians of the time to effect social change. Seton helped further the goals of Relief of Poor Widows through her familial and political connections. One of those connections was Seton's wealthy widowed godmother, Sarah Clark Startin. Startin funded *Relief of Poor Widows*. Another close friend and confidant of Elizabeth Seton, Elizabeth Schular Hamilton led the organization in 1805 after the death of her husband, Alexander Hamilton. The Hamilton family was closely connected to Albert Gallatin; Thomas Jefferson's treasury secretary and future founder of New York University in 1831 (Boylan, 2002). Gallatin did not admit women to NYU.

The combination of women demonstrating their capacity and their social capital could not alone propel them through the academy's doors. Not every philosopher agreed with broad access of women in higher education. The two prize winners of the American Philosophical Society's 1797 call for a national system of education did not include women at all in higher education. Timothy Dwight was one of the winners. Much like Witherspoon, Dwight was duplicitous. He educated girls and boys in the same room at the same time in his Greenfield Hill academy, yet did not open Yale's doors to women during his tenure as president (Kerber, 1997). Broadly, women were expected to serve others. Though girls were expected to have some education to achieve acceptable status as a wife, she need not have a broad education like her brother (Straub, 1967). Women could not demand access through their earnings; the early Republic did not have the infrastructure to create such demand. This began to change, though, when the Industrial Revolution came to America.

FINANCE

Just after the turn of the century, Francis Cabot Lowell brought automated textile manufacturing to Lowell, Massachusetts. In 1823, the Merrimack Manufacturing company recruited girls, boys, and young women from the nearby area to work in its Lowell mill (Brooks, 2017). Word spread that the Lowell factory employed girls and women; the mill and the city grew. The Lowell Girls, or Mill Girls, worked 14-hour days, earned two dollars each day, and were given residence in boarding-houses (Crowley, 1868). With that salary, some girls sent money home to

support their families or to specifically finance their brothers' education. Other did not. Many of the Mill Girls invested their money in the local Lowell bank (Robinson, 1898). From letters and journals of the day, girls who came to the Mills left changed: they wanted for more.

Though the Mill girls primarily came to rise in the middle of the 19th century, its foothold was secured just before the Civil War. Girls and women began to make their own money and with that came purchasing power and social capital. Harriet (Hanson) Robinson wrote a memoir of her time as a Mill Girl. Robinson accounted not only of factory life but also of the girls' life outside the factory. This memoir illustrated that the Mill Girls were fully engaged in academic endeavors: attending Lyceum lectures and in literary organization. The mill girls wrote and published the *Lowell Offering*, a monthly magazine. Harvard professor A.P. Peabody lectured at the Lowell Lyceum and observed, "...four-fifths of the audience were factory-girls...I have never seen anywhere so assiduous. No, not even in a college class." (In Robinson, 1898 *Loom and Spindle* pp. 74-75.) Mill Girls began to change the broader culture of which they were a part. They established themselves as independent learners, scholars, and workers. Francis Cabot Lowell, a man of business and perhaps inadvertently, cemented the linchpin in admitting women to chartered institutions of American higher education: access to their own money.

AFTER 1830

Though some women began to make their own money in 1830, it would be approximately 30 years before they could attend chartered institutions of higher education. Catherine Beecher is largely credited with this advancement (Nash, 2005). Beecher advanced the idea that women were capable teachers. Beecher engaged in political maneuverings to create higher pay for women teachers, all the while believing women's primary spaces were the classroom and the home. Though these distinctions are still present in current day, hope is not lost.

Women have capacity and must demonstrate this capacity. Desvaux, Devillard-Hoellinger, & Meany (2008) in interviews with Hewlett-Packard senior executives found that women do not apply for a job unless they meet 100 percent of the requirements, where men apply when they meet 60 percent. The implications for these discrepancies require further study, as does the generalizability of this study, however, women can begin to shift the paradigm by applying for jobs.

Women must advocate for advancement through coalition-building. In 1915, Juanita Breckenridge Bates, the chairwoman of the Tompkins County (NY) Suffrage Party felt confident the suffrage amendment would pass in Tompkins County due to strong coalitions. Though the amendment failed, it propelled women forward. As reported by the *Ithaca Journal*, Bates noted "the very best women in Ithaca suffragetted yesterday. Suffrage has fallen, but it has fallen forward." (Kammen, 2015, in text). Nearly 100 years after women began to make their own money, they were able to cast their first vote in a presidential election in 1920. Over the past 100 years, women have flown into space, served as doctors, and lawyers. However, there are barriers; sexism

is real; glass ceilings remain. Women are resilient. Women negotiate for salary, benefits, and resources in professional and personal spaces. Women through demonstrating their capacity, social capital, and finance will continue to fall forward. They will create opportunity for themselves and for those that come after them, much like our Mothers did for us.

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