CHAPTER SIX
THE WOMEN OF EARLY AMERICA

Some history books make it look as if half the people in America never even existed. History books talk about explorers, merchants, politicians, and generals—but these are all men. In early America, women couldn’t hold any of those jobs. They were invisible to history.

For the European people who settled the Americas, law and social customs said clearly that women were not the equals of men. Fathers and husbands had the right to control women. Women were oppressed, which means that they could not control their own lives. The oppression of women would be hard to uproot.

How Women Were Treated

The first settlements in the American colonies were made up almost completely of men. Women were brought in to be wives, childbearers, and companions. In 1619, a ship arrived at the colony of Jamestown, Virginia, carrying ninety women. They had agreed to come to the colony to marry men they had never met, in exchange for the cost of their passage across the Atlantic Ocean.

Many women and teenaged girls came to the colonies as indentured servants. Their lives were not very different from slaves’ lives, except that their service had an end. While they were servants, they had to obey their masters and mistresses, and they sometimes experienced sexual abuse. Female servants “were poorly paid and often treated rudely and harshly,” according to a history called America’s Working Women.

Black women suffered doubly. They were oppressed as blacks and as women. A slave trader reported on the terrible conditions they endured crossing the Atlantic:

I saw pregnant women giving birth to babies while chained to corpses which our drunken overseers had not removed.... On board the ship was a young negro woman chained to the deck, who had lost her senses soon after she was purchased and taken on board.

Even free white women faced hardships. Giving birth and raising children were difficult in a time when medical care was poor and disease was common. Eighteen married women came to America on the Mayflower, the Pilgrims’ ship. Three were pregnant. Less than a year later, only four of the women were alive. Childbirth and sickness had taken the others.

Laws and ideas carried over from England were another burden for women. Under the law, when a woman married, her husband became her master. Husbands had the legal right to control their wives in every way. A man could physically punish his wife (although he could not kill her or give her a permanent injury). Her property and possessions became his. If she earned money, that was his, too.

Advice to a Daughter was a bestselling English book. It claimed that “Inequality in Sexes” was a fact of life. Many Americans read this book, which said that men were meant to be the lawgivers and that they had more power of reason—more thinking ability—than did
women. But in spite of powerful messages that women were inferior to men, some women found ways to show their independence.

Independent Women

Anne Hutchinson was a religious woman in the early years of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. She stood up to the church fathers by insisting that she could read the Bible and figure out its meaning for herself, and so could other ordinary people.

Hutchinson went to trial twice. The church put her on trial for heresy, the crime of holding beliefs that were not approved by the religious leaders. The government of the colony put her on trial for standing up against its authority.

Hutchinson was ordered to leave the Massachusetts Bay Colony. When she left for Rhode Island in 1638, thirty-five other families followed her. Later Hutchinson went to Long Island. Indians there thought that she was one of the enemies who had cheated them out of their land, and they killed her and her family. Another woman in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Mary Dyer, was hanged because of her “rebellious” beliefs and behavior.

Few women took part in public affairs such as politics. But during the American Revolution, the pressures of war brought some women into public life. Women formed patriotic groups, carried out anti-British actions, and wrote articles for independence.

In 1777, women even had their own version of the Boston Tea Party. Abigail Adams described it in a letter to her husband John Adams, a lawyer and one of the Founding Fathers. When a rich merchant refused to sell coffee at a fair price, a band of women marched to his warehouse. After one of the women threw the merchant into a cart, he handed over his keys, and the women helped themselves to the coffee and left. Abigail Adams wrote, “A large concourse of men stood amazed, silent spectators of the whole transaction.”

On the frontier, when skill and labor were in short supply, some women had the chance to prove that they were equal to men. Before and after the Revolution, they worked at important jobs, such as publishing newspapers, running shops, and managing inns. Other women—and children, too—worked in their homes, spinning thread for local plants to weave into cloth.

When industry started to be an important part of the economy, women were pulled out of the home and into factory jobs. But at the same time, there was pressure for women to stay at home where they could be more easily controlled.

What some claimed to be the perfect woman began to appear in sermons and books. Her job was to keep the home cheerful, religious, and patriotic. She was supposed to be her family’s nurse, cook, cleaner, seamstress, teacher, and flower arranger. She shouldn’t read too much—and certain books must be avoided. Above all, a woman’s role was to meet her husband’s needs.

Women at Work

While preachers and writers were praising proper “womanly” behavior, women started pushing against the limits that society set on what they could do. They couldn’t vote or own property. They couldn’t go to college or study law and medicine. If they worked, their wages would be much less than men’s, for the same jobs.
But women were going to work. In the nineteenth century many of them found jobs in textile, or clothmaking factories, where they operated new industrial machines such as power looms. Out of every ten textile workers, eight or nine were women. Most of those women were between fifteen and thirty years old.

These working women led some of the first industrial strikes. They walked off their jobs in the textile mills to demand higher wages and better working conditions. The earliest known strike of female factory workers came in 1824, in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Ten years later, when a young woman was fired from her job in Lowell, Massachusetts, other young women left their looms in protest. One of them climbed onto the town pump and made a fiery speech about the rights of women.

Catherine Beecher was in Lowell at that time. Beecher later became a reformer who worked to improve education for women. She wrote about the mill system that inspired the women’s revolt:

I was there in mid-winter, and every morning I was awakened at five, by the bells calling to labor.... Then half an hour only allowed for dinner, from which the time for going and returning was deducted. Then back to the mills, to work till seven o’clock.... [I]t must be remembered that all the hours of labor are spent in rooms where oil lamps, together with from 40 to 80 persons, are exhausting the healthful principle of the air... and where the air is loaded with particles of cotton thrown from thousands of cards, spindles, and looms.

Rights for Women?

The textile mills weren’t the only places where people were talking about women’s rights. The place of women in society was beginning, slowly, to change.

Middle-class women couldn’t go to college, but they could become teachers in primary schools. They began to take over that profession. As teachers, they read more and communicated more. Girls and women started to knock more loudly on the doors of higher education.

In 1821, Emma Willard founded the first school specially for girls. Twenty-eight years later, Elizabeth Blackwell became a pioneer when she managed to earn a medical degree.

Women also began to write for magazines, and they even started some women’s magazines. Between 1780 and 1840, the percentage
of American women who could read and write doubled. Women joined religious organizations and became health reformers. Some of the most powerful of them joined the antislavery movement.

Through all of these activities, women gained experience in organizing, giving speeches, and taking action for causes. Soon they would use that experience in a new cause: women's rights.

Lucy Stone was a lecturer for the American Anti-Slavery Society. She was a firm speaker who wasn't afraid to voice ideas that were unpopular. During her speeches Stone was soaked with cold water, struck by a thrown book, and attacked by mobs. Still, she started lecturing about women's rights in 1847, in a church in Massachusetts where her brother was a minister.

Angelina Grimké was another antislavery activist who turned to the cause of women's rights. She believed that if the United States could “lift up millions of slaves of both sexes from the dust, and turn them into men and women,” then it could also take “millions of females from their knees and set them on their feet.”

All over the country, women did an enormous amount of work for the antislavery societies. This helped inspire a movement for women's equality that raced alongside the movement against slavery. An important starting point for the women's rights movement was a World's Anti-Slavery Convention in London, England, in 1840.

The organizers of the meeting almost kept women from attending it at all, because it wasn't “proper” for women to go to public conventions. In the end, women were allowed to attend—but only if they sat behind a curtain. American abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who supported the rights of women as well as the end of slavery, sat with them.

Being treated as second-class members of the antislavery movement angered women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. They were antislavery activists who became deeply concerned with the roles and rights of women in society.

Stanton and Mott organized the first women's rights convention in history. It took place in Stanton's hometown of Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. Three hundred women came to the meeting. So did some men who were in favor of women's rights.

At the end of the convention, a hundred people signed a Declaration of Principles that used some of the language of Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence—but changed to include women. The Declaration of Principles said that “all men and women are created equal.” It described the unfair treatment of women and outlined steps toward greater equality.

But true equality would mean more than giving rights to women. It would mean treating black women equally with white women. In 1851, at a meeting in support of women's rights, an elderly black woman sat listening to some male ministers. They were doing most of the talking. Then she rose to her feet. Tall and thin, wearing a gray dress and a white turban, this former slave named Sojourner Truth told about her life as a black woman:

That man over there says that woman needs to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches... Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles or gives me any best place. And a'nt I a woman?

Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And a'nt I a woman?

I would work as much and eat as much as a man, when I could get it, and bear the lash as well. And a'nt I a woman?

I have born thirteen children and seen 'em most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And a'nt I a woman?

As other women held conventions around the country, the movement gained strength. Women were fighting back against those who
wanted to keep them in "a woman's place." They took part in all sorts of movements—not just for women's rights but for prison reform, health care, and the end of slavery.