



Susan Ware

# AMERICAN WOMEN'S HISTORY

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD



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American Women's History  
A Very Short Introduction

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Susan Warr

# **AMERICAN WOMEN'S HISTORY**

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*To Barbara Miller Solomon and our students in Soc Sci 145*



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As a graduate student at Harvard in the 1970s, I had the wonderful good fortune to connect with Professor Barbara Miller Solomon, who invited me to become a teaching assistant for Social Science 145: Women and the American Experience. In the five years I was associated with the course, I learned the basics of women's history, from Mary Wollstonecraft to Margaret Fuller to the suffrage movement and beyond. It wasn't until I began to put together the narrative for this book that I realized how foundational that introduction had been. It is a great privilege to acknowledge this intellectual debt.

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# Introduction

“Always ask what did the women do while the men were doing what the textbook tells us was important,” historian Gerda Lerner provocatively challenged in 1981. This book answers Lerner’s charge, drawing on the explosion of scholarship in women’s history to which she was a leading contributor and theorist. Few fields of American history have grown as dramatically as women’s history over the past several decades. Courses in women’s history taught by specialists are now standard in most colleges and universities, as are interdisciplinary women’s studies programs. Historians, writers, and biographers produce a wide range of scholarship on issues of women and gender. Textbooks now include full discussions of major topics and viewpoints in women’s history as an integrated part of their general narrative.

Women’s history is a vibrant and ongoing project, and that vitality is on full display in this survey. In historian Linda Gordon’s apt image, women’s history “does not simply add women to the picture we already have of the past, like painting additional figures into the spaces of an already completed canvas. It requires repainting the earlier pictures, because some of what was previously on the canvas was inaccurate and most of it was misleading.” In other words, including women in the picture—the equivalent of “add women and stir”—means rethinking and rewriting the way American history is told.

As feminist scholarship has amply demonstrated, the category of women is difficult to generalize about. The greatest challenge in providing an overview of women’s history is to foreground which women are being discussed and not to simply allow the better documented experiences of white, middle-class women to stand in for the rest. Therefore, this narrative highlights the diversity of American women’s experiences as continually shaped by factors such as race, class, religion, geographical location, age, and sexual orientation, among others. It also highlights the moments when differences between women, such as white slaveholding women and black female slaves, or native-born social workers and their immigrant clients, call out for contrasting perspectives. Think of this project as a giant balancing act, with multiple balls in the air at once.

As its overarching theme, this survey presents “woman as force in history.” Paying homage to historian Mary Ritter Beard’s pathbreaking scholarship from the 1930s and 1940s, this conceptual framework highlights the contributions, recognized and unrecognized, that women have made to the

American experience. Without downplaying the historical constraints and barriers blocking women's advancement, the story emphasizes women as active agents rather than passive victims in a variety of contexts throughout U.S. history. Along with that goes a commitment to see America through women's eyes.

The goal is broad familiarity, not just with the history of American women but also with the main currents and themes of American history generally. It is neither possible nor desirable to write about women in isolation from men or separate from national events and trends. Instead women's stories link to larger themes at the same time they often challenge them. For example, traditional markers such as the American Revolution, the Civil War, and World War II are not necessarily the most useful concepts for organizing women's history and thus have not been deployed here. With women's stories fully integrated into the broader national story, the end result will be a richer understanding of U.S. history in all its complexity.

Gender is central to this conception of history. In its simplest formulation, gender refers to the historical and cultural constructions of roles assigned to the biological differences and attributes of women and men. While sex differences are presumed to be unchanging and innate, gender differences are subject to wide variations historically and across cultures because they are socially constructed. In other words, what it means to be a woman—or a man—changes over time.

Gender is an extremely important tool for the study of history, especially women's history. Because all historical actors have a gender, practically any historical question, from diplomacy to leisure to state policy, can be subjected to a gender analysis. Furthermore, gender analysis not only highlights the ways societies interpret the differences between the sexes but also shows how these distinctions can interact with and legitimize other hierarchical relations of power, such as race and sexuality.

While gender analysis has been enormously important to the fields of women's history and women's studies, we must never lose sight of the "real" women who make American history happen. These flesh-and-blood historical actors propel the story that follows, enriching and complicating traditional historical narratives while confirming that women have been central to American history from the start. To quote Gerda Lerner again: "What we have to offer, for consciousness, is a correct analysis of what the world is like. Up to now we have had a partial analysis. Everything that explains the world has in fact explained a world that does not exist, a world in which men are at the center of the human enterprise and women are at the margin 'helping' them. Men and women have built society and have built the world. Women have been central to it. This revolutionary insight is itself a force, a force that liberates and transforms." Knowledge is power, Lerner reminds us, and history matters, especially for women, who for so long were denied theirs: "Women's history is the primary tool for women's emancipation."

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# Chapter 1

## In the beginning: North America's women to 1750

Pocahontas is one of the best known stock characters in the history of the founding of the United States. The young Powhatan girl who supposedly saved British explorer John Smith from execution and then later journeyed to England as the wife of John Rolfe has been reduced to a conventional (and convenient) stereotype: noble Indian princess who helps white European men and thus by extension gives Indians' blessing to all that comes after.

Walt Disney made Pocahontas into a love-struck teenager, but feminist scholars see her as a much more complex character. Think of all that happened to her in the barely twenty years she lived: she literally had her feet in two different cultures, the Powhatan world in which she was raised and the English world to which she converted. And yet even as she participated in English society, she never abandoned the Powhatan spirit world that nurtured her.

Pocahontas (a childhood nickname; her birth name was Matoaka) first encountered the newly arrived English settlers from Jamestown in 1607, when John Smith was brought to her village as a captive. She was a girl of twelve, he a middle-aged man, a shaky foundation for the fateful (and likely fanciful) story of her dramatic intervention to save his life. Several years later Pocahontas herself was kidnapped and held hostage by English captors for almost a year. In part to cement Powhatan-English relations, she agreed to marry John Rolfe in what was arguably North America's first mixed-race marriage. In 1616 the couple and their young son made the difficult sea journey to England, where Pocahontas, now known by the English name Rebecca, was treated like a celebrity. Alas, British hospitality also meant exposure to British disease, against which she had no immunity, and she died. As she prepared to sail home. Instead of returning to her ancestral birthplace, she was buried on English soil.

Pocahontas was an adventurer who straddled the two cultures whose interaction determined much of the early history of colonial North America: indigenous cultures, usually referred to as Native or Indian, and the cultures of the European invaders (Spanish, English, French, and Dutch), exported in



the surge of exploration and colonization set in motion by Christopher Columbus's 1492 journey of discovery. European explorers often conceived of the North American continent as "virgin land," sparsely inhabited and still largely untouched by human settlement. In fact, North America was home to a range of vibrant and complex Native American cultures that did not simply disappear once European colonizers stepped ashore.

The contact between these two cultures involved war, upheaval, and disease, as well as interaction, negotiation, and adaptation, and gender was central to the story. Whether you were male or female affected your life just as much whether you were Native or European. The contrast between gender roles in Indian societies and European ones demonstrates the malleability of concepts of gender, as well as showing how deeply invested European settlers were in theirs.

There was no simple or linear progression in women's status over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, either for European women or their Indian counterparts. Some things changed for the better, others declined, not necessarily at the same time or the same rate for each group. By 1750, however, a vibrant colonial culture was flourishing along the Eastern seaboard, bringing prosperity and wealth to colonists who actively participated in the thriving Atlantic commercial culture.

Many older and more traditional American history texts begin with the settlements at Jamestown in 1607 or the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth in 1620, which gives the impression that the story only starts when the white folks arrive. Instead we will start our story with the peoples who were already there.

"Is it a bow or a sifter?" That is how the Cherokees assigned a male or female gender to a newborn infant. Bows were used in hunting and fishing, connecting the male infant to his future life in the forest and streams. Sifters were used in making bread and processing corn, linking the female infant to her future in the world of agriculture, plants, and food production. The Iroquois conceptualized life along similarly gendered lines when they personified the forest as male and the village as female. Most human societies differentiate men's and women's roles in some form or another; the key factor is how those differences are valued and enforced. In general Indian societies saw these demarcations as complementary, not a sign of the subordination of one sex to the other. As a result, women played vital and significant roles in Native cultures—larger, perhaps, than their European counterparts.

Native women played especially large roles in the active spirit world, in part because of their close relationship to the production of food as well as their reproductive roles. Many creation stories, such as the Acoma Pueblo origin myth of Tsicht'nako (Thought Woman) and the two sisters Iatiku (Mother of the Corn Clan) and Nautsiti (Mother of the Sun Clan), drew parallels between the origins of life and the germination of plant seeds, with human life emerging from the underworld like a sprout of maize pushing up through the soil. To honor this creation myth, all Pueblo infants received an ear of corn, a symbol of the Corn Mothers, who had given life not just to humans but to plants and animals as well.

The great majority of Indian tribes were organized matrilineally—that is, inheritance passed through the mother's line. Sexual activity began at a comparatively early age and was not confined to marriage. On marriage men moved into their wives' extended family networks, which often included multiple generations living together; these women's kin groups, rather than the conjugal ties between

husband and wife, served as the glue of social interaction. In Indian societies the community always took precedence over the individual.

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These generalizations need to be tempered by the fact that indigenous peoples never collectively identified themselves as “Indian” or “Native American,” which were terms only used by the European invaders. Instead they aligned themselves with their individual tribes or the confederations to which their tribes belonged. Further belying any sense of collective Indian identity is the striking array of cultural diversity: linguists estimate that there were four hundred spoken languages in use when Europeans began showing up on the shores. There were also significant differences among various tribes, especially by region and geography. Acoma Pueblos in the Southwest practiced intensive agriculture based on the three crops of corn, squash, and beans, whereas tribes in the Northwest, such as the Nootkas, subsisted primarily by fishing. The Iroquois in New York were distinctive for the large roles women played in the tribe’s governance.

On the eve of Columbus’s arrival in 1492, the traditional jumping-off point for narratives of American history, the North American continent was already populated with a diverse range of native peoples and cultures. Less than two hundred years later, 90 to 95 percent percent of that indigenous population had been wiped out, partly by warfare but mainly by the devastating array of diseases that Europeans brought with them to North America, especially smallpox, against which Native Americans had no immunity. But even in their weakened and diminished numbers, Indians were not passive victims of the colonizing Spanish in the Southwest and Mexico or the French, English, and Dutch settlers along the Atlantic coast. Instead it was the Europeans who did most of the accommodating, having to adapt to Native rules and customs in order to survive and hopefully prosper in this new environment. Most interaction revolved around trade: products such as beaver hides and deerskins in exchange for European goods such as firearms, metal tools, gunpowder, tobacco, and alcohol. The impact of these new trading patterns, specifically the incorporation of European goods into Native daily life, was widely apparent as early as 1650.

Like Pocahontas, who first came in contact with English settlers as a child in Jamestown, women were central to these encounters. The extensive and complex trading relationships that increasingly linked Indians and European settlers were often mediated by Indian women, who acted as “cultural mediators” or “negotiators of change.” Their services were needed, especially in the fur trade, because economic activity was conducted by families and communities, not individuals, and because Indian tribes and European settlers brought fundamentally different expectations to the table. For Natives, the act of exchanging goods and gifts represented a way to promote goodwill within and between communities, whereas their European counterparts tended to think of traded goods as tribute or profit. Very often it was Native women who supplied the social skills and local knowledge to bridge the cultural gap.

The significance of kinship in Native communities explains the key role women played. European explorers and traders, whether they be Spanish, French, Dutch, or English, were all strangers when they showed up in a new location, but what really drew attention was the fact that they came without women. To Native societies structured around matrilineal kin relationships, this gender imbalance was almost unfathomable: there literally was no place in their worldview for men without wives. So in order to build the relationships they understood to be necessary for trading alliances, the strangers had to be incorporated into kinship networks, primarily through marriage to Native women or the inform

arrangements that the French called *mariage a la facon du pays* (after the custom of the country). These were not casual or promiscuous relationships but solid family units that often included children adopted from the wife's previous relationships in addition to the couple's new biracial, bicultural offspring. Such relationships were most prevalent in the French fur trade but were also common between the Spanish conquistadors and Native women in the Southwest, where intermarriage produced the mixed-raced offspring called *mestiza*. In contrast, intermarriage between English settlers in New England and Native women was rare, in large part because the sex ratio in that region was fairly equal, unlike the skewed male-female imbalance elsewhere, especially in the seventeenth century.



**1. This Native American couple, depicted in a drawing from Roanoke, Virginia, by John White in the 1580s, prepare to eat a meal, most likely prepared by the woman by boiling the corn to remove the hulls.**

Artifacts and archaeology tell us quite a lot about the lives of Indian women, with one glaring exception: we do not know how they felt about the middle ground they occupied between two cultures because no surviving written documents preserve their story. Instead we have the accounts of European settlers and missionaries. Luckily these documents, when read carefully, can provide a wealth of information about Native life—and just as revealing a window on European attitudes and prejudices.

European observers seemed genuinely flummoxed by Native gender roles, which were so different from their own. For example, in European cultures hunting and fishing were sporting pursuits of the upper class, so the large roles that Native American men played as hunters were dismissed as frivolous and nonessential. And agriculture, especially working in the fields, was men's work in Europe, whereas it was women's work in Native American communities, and therefore was immediately devalued by missionaries and government officials who thought men should be in charge. This cultural miscommunication was the foundation of the demeaning European image of the Indian squaw forced to work like a drudge because her lazy husband was off besporting himself in the woods. If there was ever any question about the power of gender preconceptions, the total inability of

Europeans to understand that Indian cultures were organized around different and quite effective norms is a case in point.

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But Europeans did not come to North America to learn from native cultures; they came to get rich. The first waves of migrants who began arriving in Virginia in 1607 were overwhelmingly male—basically a group of young men on the make who lacked good prospects back home—and totally unprepared for dealing with such necessities as surviving the winter or foraging for food. The Indians literally were their saviors.

In the early Chesapeake settlements, white women were a tiny minority and much sought after. Most white women came as indentured servants, contracting for a set number of years of service in return for their passages over; like men, they responded to the lure of starting a new life in a new country. Once their indenture was finished, they were all but assured of marriage because of a sex ratio that hovered around six to one. Despite numerous initiatives encouraging migration to Virginia, seventeenth-century Chesapeake society failed to develop strong communities based on stable families. Only in the eighteenth century did the sex ratio come more into balance.

Settlers hoped for gold to win quick fortunes, but tobacco (introduced in 1613) turned out to be the ticket to the future for Virginia, with strongly divergent outcomes for its population based on race. Tobacco was an extremely labor intensive crop, and labor was one thing the Chesapeake lacked. Increasingly, the Virginia tobacco growers bought slaves imported from Africa to fill the void. The overall numbers of slaves were still small in the mid-seventeenth century, but by the 1680s most plantations were relying for labor on enslaved Africans. Like the white settlers, the slaves in the seventeenth century were mostly men, a fact that initially impeded the formation of slave families. And yet the low rate of runaway slaves suggests the importance of family and kin networks to enslaved African Americans from the start.

African Americans of both sexes shared the hardship of enslavement, but females bore the added responsibilities associated with child-rearing and domestic life. While there was some initial overlap in the tasks performed by slaves and indentured workers, indentured women worked in the fields infrequently, while slave women regularly did.

Historians continue to puzzle over the roots of slavery on American soil, which developed very differently from the slave system in the Caribbean, with its heavy reliance on large-scale plantations and much higher numbers (100,000 slaves in the British West Indies alone in 1675). And yet the number of enslaved Africans in North America grew inexorably: from approximately 5,000 slaves in 1675 to 13,000 by 1700, 53,000 by 1730, and 150,000 by 1750. Plantation owners affirmatively chose slave labor over free labor, allowing racist assumptions to create an enslaved class of laborers who were seen (by the white owners, that is) as more suited for such menial labor. Owning slaves also offered attractive opportunities for accruing status and power in the increasingly stratified class structure. And slaves filled a labor shortage as the number of indentured white servants declined dramatically.

The legal system quickly began to differentiate between the two classes of workers: for example, a key 1662 statute said that a slave woman's child inherited her unfree status. Among other things, this

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