

Conference

Gender, War and Culture: From Colonial Conquest, Standing Armies and Revolutionary Wars to the Wars of Nations and Empires (1650s-1910s)

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Part 1: Chapter 5

WAR, VIOLENCE, AND GENDER IN COLONIAL AND REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA

Serena Zabin (Carleton College)

Introduction

The warfare of eighteenth-century America, from European-native conflicts to the American Revolution, has rarely been considered in gendered terms. Only recently have questions of honor and masculinity come to the forefront of questions about military culture. With a few exceptions, scholars have considered women as objects of violence rather than as vital participants in war and military culture. Similarly, the study of men has focused on them primarily as officers or warriors, but only rarely as rank and file soldiers, and never as fathers or husbands. This chapter will consider the interrelationship between gender, war, and political culture to demonstrate the social and cultural outcomes of military conflicts in America.

This chapter is chronologically structured around three related themes and one case study. First, there is a rich and sophisticated literature on masculinity and the cultural divide between Europeans and Native Americans. Historians disagree on whether colonialism was founded on the distinctions and misunderstandings between English, Spanish, or French fighters and native ones, or whether the definitions and practices of masculinity between the two groups was actually shared. Second, as wars between small communities of settlers and individual Indian nations widened into imperial conflicts and pan-Indian alliances in the 1750s and 1760s, the arrival of British and French regiments in North America reshaped military cultures, destabilizing old gender practices and ideologies. As an examination of the occupation of Boston from 1768-1772 by British regulars will show, gendered power emerged out of garrison life in peacetime as well as war. Finally, the pervasiveness of the American Revolutionary war, stretching as it did from city to country, from white farms to Indian fields, and from rebellion to nation building, had a particularly marked impact on gender orders in the building of the new nation.

Colonial Wars

European settlers in North America encountered a world of warfare very different from the one to which they were accustomed. Because “gendered constructions of kinship” so predominantly shaped Native politics, including native warfare, women at all ends of the spectrum of power played essential roles. Women were both engines and pawns in Native wars. Senior women were “peace chiefs” and diplomats in most, if not all, native nations. Their participation in war councils was a central part of their political power, and as a result, such women had a central role in the beginnings, endings, and even intensity of warfare. These women rose to their positions of authority in large part through their kin connections to both warriors and diplomats.¹

Likewise, far less powerful women created new kin networks through war. The violence of these native wars (both with and without European involvement) had a significant impact on

enslavement and capture of white, black, and native women. From the southwest to the northeast corners of the continent, captive women became pawns, slaves, and sometimes family in new regions and new cultures. These wars both created and destroyed families and racial distinctions through the exchange of women. As objects of violence, women in Native wars were sometimes killed in recompense for deaths of other women. Unlike Europeans, Native Americans rarely if ever included rape as an element of warfare. Much more commonly, women were adopted into new families. Such practices ran counter to European ideas of warfare, in which women had no role except as supporting personnel. Enemy women, in the view of the French, English, and Spanish military, might be raped, assaulted, or starved, but never adopted. Native American military practices from the southeast to the Great Lakes, by contrast, organized their war practices in order to take women as prisoners. Indian nations both valued women as a spoil of war and sometimes imagined them as sufficiently culturally mutable to become family.²

Not so European warriors. Even those Europeans who initially imagined race as mutable or who might even have encouraged intermarriage between European men and native women never imagined such intermarriage as a war aim. For the French or the Spanish, and very occasionally the English, intermarriage might be a way of avoiding war, perhaps, or of cementing alliances, but never an inspiration for war itself.

Sustained military and economic contact between Europeans and native Americans had an impact on the place of women in colonial warfare. In the southeast, African women captured in war became less likely to be incorporated into families. Instead, their place in Native societies slowly contracted until their only possible status was as a slave. This shift was in part a result of the extension of the practice of chattel slavery by whites in the southeast. Colonial governments also became factors in native warfare. When native warriors seized French or English women, colonial governments were often willing to pay appreciable sums for their return.³

Warfare with Europeans over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries changed some of these gendered expectations of war for many Indian nations, particularly in European-settled areas along the eastern seaboard. In particular, notions of kinship as a way of organizing and controlling diplomacy and war fell away, decreasing women's power over war aims and decisions. Yet overall the targeting of women – even as they became pawns or potential money-making objects of redemption by European governments – persisted.

Europeans consistently reacted with horror at the targeting of women for capture in Indian warfare, but they also shared with Indians an understanding that masculinity was closely tied to prowess in warfare. Nowhere in North America, scholars have remarked, was it a compliment to call a warrior a “woman.” All cultures shared an ideology of masculinity that was tied to combat itself. Warfare in colonial America was predicated on this mutual definition of battle-tested manliness.⁴

Thus the place of women in warfare continued to be a major dividing line between Native and European ways of war throughout the eighteenth century, even as they got a lot more practice in fighting each other. However, in the single arena of warrior conduct and particularly issues of masculine honor, Europeans and Indians seemed to share a definition of gender ideologies. Colonial wars both reinforced martial ideals of masculinity and called into question the place of women in cross-cultural warfare.

Wars for Empire

Second, the expanded presence of European armies in North America that began with the Seven Years War introduced new forms of military culture to the continent. Two of the most salient, officers' honor and female camp followers, may seem entirely unconnected, separated by a deep gulf of white social status between officers and privates. But because both of these aspects developed only with the presence of standing regiments in North America in the eighteenth-century, together, they worked together to constitute European states' military presence in the American colonies.

When these two developments are considered in the context of other sites of military culture, moreover, especially practices of sociability and considerations of dress and grooming, it becomes obvious that the expansion of state power depended on particular gender practices throughout the French, British, and eventually American, armies.

Before the Seven Years War, Indian warriors and European militiamen alike could claim honor through combat. English colonial and French Canadian militias were only loosely hierarchical, and their officer corps was fluid and rarely consisted of aristocrats. The arrival of regular French and British troops changed all that, restricting claims of honorable (and dishonorable) masculinity to the officer class only. Aristocratic values of gentility informed officer behavior, as men imported enormous supplies of food, clothing, and furniture to ensure that they could live in the style that they considered appropriate, even on the battlefield. But definitions of honorable conduct shifted as a result of the war. As fortune turned against the French in the Seven Years War, French army officers came to believe that honorable manhood was better found in their loyalty to the French crown than in success in battle – an enormous shift from earlier Canadian masculine identities.⁵

British regular officers also began to redefine manhood as a result of imperial state building. As British Army officers struggled to make sense of warfare in the North American wilderness rather than in the European or West Indian theaters to which they were accustomed, they began to put as much emphasis on the process as the outcome of any military engagement. Contrasting their own definition of “behavior befitting an officer and a gentleman” against their Native and French foes, as well as their colonial allies, British officers decried the “skulking” way of woodland warfare. To such men, these modes of “savage” warfare looked a great deal like the very acts of cowardice or effeminacy that might inspire a duel or a court martial among British officers. As the British army drove the French out of North America and beat back Indian attacks, officers boasted that British military success was due to their “firmness, prudence, and intrepidity,” rather than tactical choices. The expansion of the British empire, in other words, depended more on an officer’s character than on his prowess.⁶

The British army in particular was notorious for the number of women attached to it. Although officers’ own sexual conquests were a matter of some pride, they could also at times be deeply suspicious of women married to privates. The British Army determined by the middle of the eighteenth century that it would pay for six women per company, or roughly sixty women per regiment. The army needed a few women, primarily as laundresses, and was willing to pay for them. As men refused to do laundry, the army brass felt it had little choice. But from their point of view, women were part of a necessary labor force. Officers frequently denigrated these women as prostitutes, lazy, and likely carriers of venereal disease.⁷

The widespread presence of army women in the British army in particular compels us to rethink the image of the army as an all-male institution. As much as officers scorned these women, they found that they could not do without them. Indeed, when George Washington attempted to drive women away from the military camps around Boston after the Battle of Bunker Hill, he soon found that he could not maintain an army without women. His soldiers refused to wash clothes, insisting that it was women’s work only, and he soon found his troops decimated by disease.⁸

In both the British and American armies, women’s presence did not necessarily contribute to their status. Indeed, while men’s participation in the army, even when coerced, could garner them patriotic approbation, women’s mere presence in a military camp was fraught with suspicion. To many, they seemed either vicious or sexually depraved. Yet officers and privates alike realized that military success depended on the labor of women. If a comparison against enemies’ ways of war helped define military masculinity, a sharp sexual division of labor made clear military men’s dependence on women’s work.⁹

Military occupation

Next the essay will include an in-depth case study of the gender dynamics of military occupation, in a situation where the homefront and the frontlines were one and the same. When four regiments of British troops were sent to Boston in 1768, the occupation precipitated the shooting that came to be known as the Boston Massacre. Although leaders on both sides of the conflict found it useful to portray the combatants as young, single men, in fact, many of the soldiers, both privates and officers, were married men with families, including children, who had accompanied them across the British empire. Others married Boston women in the months both before and after the shooting. This study reveals the gendered world of the garrison, in which military imperatives and intimate relationships were inextricably linked.¹⁰

This case study opens up a number of questions about competing forms of gendered power within the military. Officers, privates, and civilians alike understood that the occupation of Boston in 1768 was an exercise of British military authority, a demonstration of its state-building power. At the same time, it was also a group of armed men inserting themselves into a community that had quite different, and competing, ideas about performances of masculinity.

Take, for example, the story of Private William Clarke. Clarke managed to seduce the granddaughter of one of Boston's town officials, who walked in on the soldier *in flagrante* with his twenty-year-old granddaughter. Rakes were by no means restricted to the British army; plenty of Boston women were prosecuted for fornication after 1750. Less common in Boston's civilian life, however, was the loaded pistol that Clarke shoved into the chest of his Boston lover only two weeks later. That form of violently staking a claim to a woman's body was much more common in British military culture.¹¹

At the same time, military and civilian men shared a vision of patriarchal power encapsulated in marriage. Privates in the eighteenth-century British army are envisioned to be outside the structures of Hanoverian society. As a result of their enlistment for life, their low wages, their reputation as hardened criminals, and their overall dependence on officers in a harsh and hierarchical military structure, it can be difficult to imagine privates as heads of households. But even privates were able to access the privileges of patriarchal marriage. In fact, ironically, the army itself often made such marriage possible. The stability of income for a man, and occasionally for a woman, that the army could offer, brought marriage within the reach of men who otherwise might have had a harder time establishing themselves as a household head with dependents. Surprisingly, the marriage of army privates, both before and during the occupation of Boston, demonstrates the confluence of two forms of male power: head of a household and a berth in the military.¹²

American Revolution

Finally, American Revolutionary war itself, as both a military event and a catalyst for producing a nation, had the power to thoroughly reshape gender orders, sometimes radically, and sometimes quite regressively. In the context of a revolutionary war, gender conflicts from fashion to rape were refracted through the lens of the military contest. Even once the war was over, its memory shaped gender relationships in and to the new nation.

Conflicts over fashion simmered in revolutionary America even before war was declared. The non-importation and non-consumption movements of the late 1760s and early 1770s held up homespun and simplicity as patriotic fashion, a sartorial mode that few white Americans embraced happily. When the battles of Lexington and Concord released colonials' *rage militaire*, men discovered that they could once again wear fashionable clothes legitimately, so long as they were in the military mode. For men, soldiers' dress could be both patriotic and appealing to the opposite sex. Women found, however, that their attempts at fashion could brand them as traitors.¹³

Like the military mode of fashion, violent men in uniform wielded symbolic as well as physical violence during the Revolutionary war. Stories about rape in particular had surprisingly little to say about women, but communicated a great deal about gendered power. Stories about violence against women by soldiers became might become political, rather than personal, morality

tales about the violence of the British empire against its colonies. Or conversely, similar stories were circulated, often by and to loyalist women about the violations of their bodily integrity practiced by rebels. Even when these stories placed women as victims of military masculinity, their retelling by women was itself an act of resistance. In this way, women found a place for feminine participation in the Revolutionary war.¹⁴

Other aspects of the Revolutionary war showed women and men acting in concert rather than against each other. Unlike in earlier eighteenth century wars, women's military participation was celebrated and occasionally remunerated. Most famously, a cross-dressing soldier, Deborah Sampson, was one of a handful of women who received a military pension when the war ended. As an acknowledgment of the contributions of at least some military washer-women, the United States Congress granted pensions to at least a few camp followers, including to an army wife named Sarah Osborne.¹⁵

But despite these indications of appreciation for military contributions that the United States offered to a few women, overall the official memories of women's participation in the American Revolution were partial and limited. They were restricted primarily to two roles: keeping alive the memory of martyred men, and performing the symbolic cultural work of bereft widows. The restriction of white women's opportunities for inclusion in the memory of the Revolutionary War was intensified by the backlash against their political participation in the creation of the new nation. Rather than taking a place as rights- (and arms-) bearing citizens, white women were restricted to a position as republican wives and mothers. Even some non-white women found their political power increasingly circumscribed by the new political world. As native nations in the southeast adopted to a continent with only one European power, they found the United States undermining warrior culture, the traditional site of Indian masculinity. As a result, both Creek and Cherokee women found their own political power, particularly their power to control property and make war, diminished.¹⁶

The complete domestication of femininity in American military projects becomes evident in the War of 1812. In this final military conflict against the British, the new United States appealed to family values and especially the willingness of women to populate the nation. Women's military and national contributions in this war were to be purely reproductive. In the end, however, this reproductive labor counted more than men's military contributions. Although the War of 1812 was militarily inconclusive, Americans claimed victory simply by having children.¹⁷

¹ Juliana Barr, *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman: Indians and Spaniards in the Texas Borderlands* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Wayne E. Lee, "Peace Chiefs and Blood Revenge: Patterns of Restraint in Native American Warfare, 1500–1800," *The Journal of Military History* 71, no. 3 (2007): 701–741; Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835* (University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

² James Brooks, *Captives & Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History & Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Michelle LeMaster, *Brothers Born of One Mother: British-Native American Relations in the Colonial Southeast* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012); Brett Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance: Indigenous and Atlantic Slavery in New France* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

³ Jon Parmenter, "After the Mourning Wars: The Iroquois as Allies in Colonial North American Campaigns, 1676-1760," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 39–76;

Christina Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America* / (Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁴ Tyler Boulware, “‘We Are Men’: Native American and Euroamerican Projections of Masculinity During the Seven Years’ War,” in *New Men: Manliness in Early America*, ed. Thomas A. Foster (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Wayne E. Lee, “Peace Chiefs and Blood Revenge: Patterns of Restraint in Native American Warfare, 1500–1800,” *The Journal of Military History* 71, no. 3 (2007): 701–741; Ann M. Little, *Abraham in Arms: War and Gender in Colonial New England* (Pennsylvania State Press, 2007).

⁵ Christian Ayne Crouch, *Nobility Lost: French and Canadian Martial Cultures, Indians, and the End of New France*, (Cornell University Press, 2014).

⁶ Tyler Boulware, “‘We Are Men’: Native American and Euroamerican Projections of Masculinity During the Seven Years’ War,” in *New Men: Manliness in Early America*, ed. Thomas A. Foster (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Arthur N. Gilbert, “Law and Honour among Eighteenth-Century British Army Officers,” *The Historical Journal* 19, no. 1 (March 1, 1976): 75–87. Quotation from Gage to Halifax, October 12, 1764, in Clarence Edwin Carter, comp., *The Correspondence of General Thomas Gage with the Secretaries of State, 1763-1773* (Archon Books, 1969), vol 1, p. 40.

⁷ Paul E. Kopperman, “The British High Command and Soldiers’ Wives in America, 1755-1783,” *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 60, no. 241 (Spring 1982): 14–34; Holly A. 1956-Mayer, *Belonging to the Army: Camp Followers and Community during the American Revolution* (University of South Carolina Press, 1996); Judith L. Van Buskirk, *Generous Enemies: Patriots and Loyalists in Revolutionary New York*. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (Routledge, 2003).

⁸ Kathleen M. Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America*. (Yale University Press, 2009).

⁹ Caroline Cox, *A Proper Sense of Honor: Service and Sacrifice in George Washington’s Army* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

¹⁰ See Serena Zabin, *Occupying Boston: An Intimate History of the Boston Massacre*, in progress.

¹¹ Affair with Mary Nowell: *Boston Evening-Post*, July 31, 1769; Pistol: Superior Court of Judicature record book, 1770, p. 29. Massachusetts Judicial Archives.

¹² Stephen Brumwell, *Redcoats: The British Soldier and War in the Americas, 1755-1763* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹³ Kate Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America*. (University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Sharon Block, “Rape without Women: Print Culture and Politicization of Rape, 1765-1815,” *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 3 (December 2002): 849–868; Sarah M. S. Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2010); Sarah M.S. Pearsall, “Women in the American Revolutionary War,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Revolution*, ed. Edward G Gray (Oxford; New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012).

¹⁵ Alfred Fabian Young, *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier* edition. (Alfred A. Knopf, 2004).

¹⁶ Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence* (Knopf, 2005); Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835*. (University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Sarah J. Purcell, *Sealed with Blood: War, Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Claudio Saunt, *A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733-1816* Cambridge Studies in North American Indian History. (Cambridge University Press, 1999); Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Nicole Eustace, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism* . (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).