

A Brief History of Women's History by Carol Berkin



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But we were, above all, scholars. And we were disturbed to see that when we looked at history, we did not see faces that resembled us. We decided it was time to add those faces to the panorama that was America's past. With that,

a new social history was born. And, to our surprise, it turned out there were plenty of sources—they were just a bit buried.

There were distinct phases or stages in the history we scholars of women's history wrote in the 1980s and 1990s. And it turned out that working-class history, African American history, and later gay and lesbian history, followed the same pattern. The two most significant stages were a focus on victimization—that is, the ways in which the dominant

groups restricted the autonomy and individualism of our group. Next, we turned to uncovering the contributions, largely ignored or forgotten, made by members of these victimized groups. These phases often overlapped and they have not completely disappeared. What is perhaps remarkable is that these stages seemed to be an essential piece of every field of social history.

For those of us determined to restore women to the history of the colonial era and the early republic, our research began with etiquette and advice manuals, sermons, legal treatises, and other prescriptive literature that told women what their proper role in society was and instructed them on feminine virtues. Although these rules of behavior were often written in flowery and flattering language, their purpose was clear: to confine and constrain women's choices in life. Laws made them permanent economic dependents on fathers and husbands; custom and tradition narrowed their adult paths to marriage and motherhood; and religious teachings urged them to be obedient and submissive to men. They were victims, in short, of a system that favored

men and disadvantaged women. Yet we rejected the argument that these limitations made women little more than passive observers of that history. Like the slave laboring in the tobacco fields, like the apprentice working in the blacksmith shop, women of early America had what social historians call "agency." This meant that no matter how limited a person or a group's options were, they still made choices, they took actions, and those choices and actions help shape the history of their era. This concept of agency enabled us to drive home the point that even though the colonial housewife and the women of the early republic had few rights and few opportunities in public life, they too had settled the colonies, fought for independence, and engaged in acts of patriotism. In short, they had contributed to the emergence of the American republic.

As we combed the archives, we discovered that there were exceptional women who, by virtue of their brilliance or their bravery or their creativity, had made important contributions to our national history. Yet they remained, to borrow Willa Cather's bittersweet phrase,

When I started college in the 1960s, women bobbed occasionally on the ocean of American History—Pocahontas, Abigail Adams, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and, of course, Eleanor Roosevelt. Up they came to the water's surface—usually in a sidebar in the text book—and then, they vanished with little trace. Graduate school showed little improvement in the attention to our foremothers. When I asked about the possibility of doing a

dissertation on early American women, my advisor looked genuinely puzzled. "But there is nothing to say," he declared, "and no sources to say it." Yet by the 1970s, change was in the air. The new crop of Ph.D.'s included women, working-class men, Italians, Jews, and African Americans—groups rarely seen in doctoral cap and gown before then. We came of age in an era of reform; radical politics, feminism, union activism, the civil rights movement, and the antiwar movement informed our work.

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“lost ladies.” We believed they deserved to be “found,” and thus biographies appeared of innovators like Eliza Lucas Pinckney, who introduced a new cash crop—indigo—into Southern agriculture; intellectuals like Judith Sargent Murray, whose *Gleaner Essays* helped spur the post-Revolutionary War emergence of female academies in every state; adventurers like Deborah Sampson Gannett, who donned male clothing, enlisted in the continental army, and fought bravely for three and half years, being wounded twice; and heroes like Dolley Madison, whose bravery not only saved the portrait of the nation's first president from a burning White House during the War of 1812, but whose political genius helped shape the social setting in which the politics of the young republic could be conducted. Their names and their deeds deserved a place in the history textbooks that young girls—and boys—would read.

As our work continued, we discovered how plentiful the sources were on women. Going from archive to archive, we were careful to leave each other notes that read, “There’s a woman’s diary stuck away in the file marked

‘Miscellaneous,’ or ‘There’s a treasure trove of letters filed under ‘other documents.’” Yet, in a critical way these sources led us astray. It took us a while to realize that most of the literate women of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries who left these diaries and letters were white and members of the privileged classes. We were reminded by women of color that the stories we were telling were not the stories of enslaved women, frontier wives, Native Americans, or servants. After all, Dolley Madison and Sukey, her slave, saw the world through very different lenses. We realized that we could not write the story of white elite women and call it the history of American women. There simply was no such person as “the” American woman; race, class, region, religion, and a host of other factors cross-cut and complicated gender. We soon learned to interpret our sources more subtly and to seek out new sources, using anthropology, sociology, and computer technology. Technology helped us analyze aggregate data like birth and death records, account books, ship manifests, and court records. Hundreds of court cases could be programed to reveal what crimes women were likely to be accused

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of or commit, while wills and probate court records revealed female property holding and the ways in which women challenged the distribution of their husbands’ wealth. We might never be able to write the biography of an individual enslaved woman, for she did not have the leisure or the skill to keep a diary or write letters that revealed her feelings and her ideas, but we were able to draw collective portraits of childbirth patterns among enslaved women, their work roles on Virginia tobacco plantations and in South Carolina rice paddies, and to examine the survival of African traditions through the naming of children. These collective portraits continued our mission of writing what one scholar aptly called “history from the bottom up.”

By the end of the twentieth century, a new generation of women’s history scholars had

emerged and the field took new directions. These historians have chosen to focus primarily on cultural and ideological issues. They have asked a series of provocative questions about the relationship between race and gender, about sex and power, and about how both women and men learn their gendered roles. They are less interested in the lived experiences of women than in applying theories that explain the layers of meaning in those lives. They rely more heavily on feminist theory than on the kind of primary sources my generation found in archives and dusty attics. There are, however, many historians who still continue to search those archives for clues to women’s daily lives. And there are many historians who still search for those lost ladies whose special contributions to our past deserve to be uncovered. The study of lived experiences continues side by side with the search for theoretical overviews.

Today, library shelves groan under the weight of books and journal articles on American women, proof that my dissertation advisor was wrong when he said there was nothing to say about women and no sources to use in saying it.

But it might be wise to remember that the battle to fully integrate women’s experiences into the basic history curriculum offered to our sons and daughters, from elementary school to graduate classes, has not been won. Presidents, generals, male heroes and villains still dominate the reading lists of college courses and the pages of our textbooks.

The voices we hear in the primary sources most often examined in the classroom are often exclusively male. Teachers and students still need to ask, “Where are the women in this story you are telling us?” Girls as much as boys still need to see themselves as actors in our national past. The current emphasis on science and technology, the devaluing of the humanities, and the erosion of time in elementary and high school classes spent on history make our task harder. As the white knight said to Alice while they stood on the chess board, “You have to run twice as fast to stay in one place.” It seems the work of women’s scholars and of those who hope to see women fully integrated into our national story, like so much of women’s work, is “never done.”