

The Sentiments of an American Woman

Esther De Berdt Reed

Introduction

Esther De Berdt Reed served as First Lady of Pennsylvania during the American Revolution. Reed organized the Ladies' Association in Philadelphia to aid in the war effort. Reed and other women knocked on doors, campaigned with words, and held public events, raising \$300,000 for the Continental Army. At the request of George Washington, The Ladies' Association also sewed thousands of pieces of clothing for the American Army. Reed penned the broadside, Reed published *The Sentiments of an American Women* in 1780, not just to inspire other women to join the cause, but also publicly acknowledge the important role women already played in the war effort. Reed's words were so effective that women in cities across the colonies took to raising money as well. Reed died suddenly of a fever shortly after her broadside was published. She was 34 when she died.¹

Primary Source

On the commencement of actual war, the Women of America manifested a firm resolution to contribute as much as could depend on them to the deliverance of their country. Animated by the purest patriotism, they are sensible of sorrow at this day in not offering more than barren wishes for the success of so glorious a Revolution. They aspire to render themselves more really useful, and this sentiment is universal from the north to the south of the Thirteen United States.

Our ambition is kindled by the fame of those heroines of antiquity, who have rendered their sex illustrious and have proved to the universe that if the weakness of our Constitution, if opinion and manners did not forbid us to march to glory by the same paths as the Men, we should at least equal and sometimes surpass them in our love for the public good. I glory in all that which my sex has done great and commendable.

I call to mind with enthusiasm and with admiration all those acts of courage, of constancy and patriotism, which history has transmitted to us the people favored by Heaven, preserved from destruction by the virtues, the zeal and the resolution of Deborah, of Judith, of Esther!² The fortitude of the mother of the Maccabees in giving up her sons to die before her eyes; Rome saved from the fury of a victorious enemy by the efforts of Volumnia and other Roman Ladies: So many famous sieges where the Women have been seen forgetting the weakness of their sex,

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² Women of the Old Testament.

building new walls, digging trenches with their feeble hands, furnishing arms to their defenders, they themselves darting the missile weapons on the enemy, resigning the ornaments of their apparel and their fortune to fill the public treasury, and to hasten the deliverance of their country, burying themselves under its ruins, throwing themselves into the flames rather than submit to the disgrace of humiliation before a proud enemy.

Born for liberty, disclaiming to bear the irons of a tyrannic Government, we associate ourselves to the grandeur of those Sovereigns, cherished and revered, who have held with so much splendor the scepter of the greatest States [nations] the Batildas, the Elizabeths, the Maries, the Catharines, who have extended the empire of liberty and contented to reign by sweetness and justice, have broken the chains of slavery forged by tyrants in the times of ignorance and barbarity.³ The Spanish Women, do they not make at this moment the most patriotic sacrifices to increase the means of victory in the hands of their Sovereign.⁴ He is a friend to the French Nation. They are our allies. We call to mind, doubly interested, that it was a French maid⁵ who kindled up amongst her fellow-citizens the flame of patriotism buried under long misfortunes: It was the Maid of Orleans who drove from the kingdom of France the ancestors of those same British whose odious yoke we have just shaken off, and whom it is necessary that we drive from this Continent.

But I must limit myself to the recollection of this small number of achievements. Who knows if persons disposed to censure, and sometimes too severely with regard to us, may not disapprove our appearing acquainted even with the actions of which our sex boasts? We are at least certain that he cannot be a good citizen who will not applaud our efforts for the relief of the armies which defend our lives, our possessions, our liberty? The situation of our soldiery has been represented to me the evils inseparable from war, and the firm and generous spirit which has enabled them to support these. But it has been said that they may apprehend that, in the course of a long war, the view of their distresses may be lost and their services be forgotten. Forgotten! never. I can answer in the name of all my sex. Brave Americans, your disinterestedness, your courage, and your constancy will always be dear to America as long as she shall preserve her virtue.⁶

We know that at a distance from the theatre of war, if we enjoy any tranquility, it is the fruit of your watchings, your labors, your dangers. If I live happy in the midst of my family, if my husband cultivates his field and reaps his harvest in peace, if surrounded with my children I myself nourish the youngest and press it to my bosom without being afraid of seeing myself separated from it by a ferocious enemy, if the house in which we dwell, if our barns, our orchards are safe at the present time from the hands of those incendiaries, it is to you that we owe it. And shall we hesitate to evidence to you our gratitude? Shall we hesitate to wear a clothing more simple, hair dressed less elegant, while at the price of this small privation we shall deserve your benedictions. Who amongst us will not renounce with the highest pleasure those vain

³ Women monarchs: Bathilda of the Franks, Elizabeth I of England, Marie Antoinette of France, Catharine the Great of Russia.

⁴ As Spain was allied with France, the major U.S. ally, a group of "Havana Ladies" in Cuba donated jewelry to support the Continental Army.

⁵ Joan of Arc.

⁶ What does Reed say to men who disapprove of women's involvement in the War?

ornaments when she shall consider that the valiant defenders of America will be able to draw some advantage from the money which she may have laid out in these, that they will be better defended from the rigors of the seasons, that after their painful toils they will receive some extraordinary and unexpected relief, that these presents will perhaps be valued by them at a greater price when they will have it in their power to say: This is the offering of the Ladies.⁷

The time is arrived to display the same sentiments which animated us at the beginning of the Revolution when we renounced the use of teas, however agreeable to our taste, rather than receive them from our persecutors, when we made it appear to them that we placed former necessities in the rank of superfluities, when our liberty was interested, when our republican and laborious hands spun the flax, prepared the linen intended for the use of our soldiers, when exiles and fugitives we supported with courage all the evils which are the concomitants of war. Let us not lose a moment; let us be engaged to offer the homage of our gratitude at the altar of military valor, and you, our brave deliverers, while mercenary slaves combat to cause you to share with them the irons with which they are loaded, receive with a free hand our offering, the purest which can be presented to your virtue,

BY AN AMERICAN WOMAN.

I D E A S, relative to the manner of forwarding to the
American Soldiers the Presents of the American Women:

All the plans are eligible when doing good is the object; there is however one more preferable, and when the operation is extensive, we cannot give it too much uniformity. On the other side, the wants of our army do not permit the slowness of an ordinary path. It is not in one month nor in eight days that we would relieve our soldiery. It is immediately, and our impatience does not permit us to proceed by the long circuitry of collectors, receivers and treasurers.

As my idea with regard to this have been approved by some Ladies of my friends, I will explain them here. Every other person will not be less at liberty to prepare and to adopt a different plan.

1st. All Woman and Girls will be received without exception to present their patriotic offering; and, as it is absolutely voluntary, every one will regulate it according to her ability and her disposition. The shilling offered by the Widow or the young Girl will be received as well as the most considerable sums presented by the Women who have the happiness to join to their patriotism greater means to be useful...

2d. A Lady chosen by the others in each county shall be the Treasuress; and to render her task more simple and more easy, she will not receive but determinate sums, in a round number, from twenty hard dollars to any greater sum. The exchange forty dollars in paper for one dollar in specie. It is hoped that there will not be one Woman who will not with pleasure charge herself with the embarrassment which will attend so honorable an operation⁸...

⁷ What movement is Reed referencing here? What is "the offering of the Ladies?"

⁸ Specie refers to actual gold, silver, and other hard currency. During the colonial era, paper currency ("dollars") was more like an IOU, which was then exchanged for species. Reed expects women will collect "dollars" to exchange for hard specie. The "Treasuress" will then send the specie directly to the Army.

3d. The Women who shall not be in a condition to send twenty dollars in specie, or above, will join in as great a number as will be necessary to make this or any greater sum, and one amongst them will carry it or cause it to be sent to the Treasures⁹...

4th. The Treasures of the county will receive the money and will keep a register, writing the sums in her book, and causing it to be signed at the side of the whole by the person who has presented it.

5th. When several Women shall join together to make a total sum of twenty dollars or more, she amongst them who shall have the charge to carry it to the Treasures will make mention of all their names on the register, if her associates shall have so directed her; those whose choice it shall be will have the liberty to remain unknown.¹⁰

6th. As soon as the Treasures of the county shall judge that the sums which she shall have received deserve to be sent to their destination, she will cause them to be presented with the lifts¹¹ to the wife of the Governor or President of the State, who will be the Treasures-General of the State; and she will cause it to be set down in her register and have it sent to Mistress Washington. If the Governor or President are unmarried, all will address themselves to the wife of the Vice-President, if there is one, or of the Chief-Justice, &c.

7th. Women settled in the distant parts of the country [state] and not choosing for any particular reason as for the sake of greater expedition, to remit their Capital to the Treasures, may send it directly to the wife of the Governor or President, &c. or to Mistress Washington¹², who, if she shall judge necessary, will in a short answer to the sender acquaint her with the reception of it.

8th. As Mrs. Washington may be absent from the camp when the greater part of the banks shall be sent there, the American Women considering that General Washington is the Father and Friend of the Soldiery, that he is himself the first Soldier of the Republic, and that their offering will be received at its destination as soon as it shall have come to his hands, they will pray [request of] him to take the charge of receiving it in the absence of Mrs. Washington...

9th. General Washington will dispose of this fund in the manner that he shall judge most advantageous to the Soldiery. The American Women desire only that it may not be considered as to be employed to procure to the army the objects of subsistence, arms, or clothing which are due to them by the Continent. It is an extraordinary bounty intended to render the condition of the Soldier more pleasant and not to hold place of the things which they ought to receive from the Congress or from the States¹³.

⁹ If a woman doesn't have twenty dollars of her own, she will raise at least that amount before sending the money to the Treasures for exchange in specie.

¹⁰ All the women will be recognized by name for their efforts.

¹¹ In Old English, "lifts" refers to money raised or collected.

¹² Martha Washington, wife of George Washington.

¹³ Reed initially wanted to send the specie directly to the soldiers as a bonus of sorts. She states explicitly that "American Women" do not want the money to be used for essentials that should be provided by the Army and Congress. Concerned the soldiers would spend the specie on alcohol and other vices, General Washington asked Reed and the Ladies' Association to use the money to purchase linen and make clothing for the soldiers.

10th. If the General judges necessary, he will publish at the end of a certain time an amount of that which shall have been received from each particular State.

11th. The Women who shall send their offerings will have in their choice to conceal or to give their names, and if it shall be thought proper on a fit occasion to publish one day the lifts, they only, who shall consent, shall be named, when with regard to the sums sent there will be no mention made if they so desire it. _____