Republican Motherhood

"Republican Motherhood" identifies the concept related to women's roles as mothers in the emerging United States before and after the American Revolution (c. 1760 to 1800). It centered around the belief that children should be raised to uphold the ideals of republicanism, making them the perfect citizens of the new nation.

Republicanism and Women's Roles

With the growing emphasis being placed on republicanism, women were expected to partake in promoting these values - they had a "special role to play"[1] in raising their children. In Linda K. Kerber's article "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment - An American Perspective", she compared republican motherhood to the Spartan model of childhood[2] - children are raised to value patriotism and the sacrificing of their own needs for the greater good of the country. By doing so, the mothers would encourage their sons to pursue liberty and roles in the government, while their daughters would perpetuate the domestic sphere with the next generation. In addition, women were permitted to receive more of an education than they previously had been allowed. Abigail Adams was an especial advocate of this, as demonstrated in her many letters to her husband John Adams (see Abigail Adams link for more detail).

Many Christian ministers, such as the Reverend Thomas Bernard, actively supported the ideals of republican motherhood.[3] They felt that this was the image women should follow, as opposed to the more public roles promoted by Mary Wollstonecraft and her contemporaries. Traditionally, women had been viewed as morally inferior to men, especially in the areas of sexuality and religion. However, as the nineteenth century drew closer, many ministers (especially Protestants) and moralists began to believe that "modesty and purity were inherent in women's nature,"[4] giving them a unique ability to promote Christian values with their children.

History of Republican Motherhood

The term "republican motherhood" did not explicitly appear in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. It was first used as a description in 1980 by historian Linda K. Kerber in her book Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America. Historian Jan Lewis subsequently expanded the concept in her article "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic," published in the William and Mary Quarterly (1987). However, its early seeds were found in the works of John Locke, the famous eighteenth-century philosopher. In his First Treatise, he included women into social theory, but it wasn't until his Second Treatise where he defined women's roles more clearly. As Kerber quotes in her essay "the first society was between man and wife, which gave beginning to that between parents and children... conjugal society is made by a voluntary compact between man and woman."[5] In other words, contrary to the traditional sexual hierarchy promoted by Robert Filmer and others, men and women had more equal roles in a marriage. Women were still expected to focus on domestic issues, but the value of the domestic
sphere was much higher after Locke's treatises. Although Locke's arguments in support of women diminished after he had dissected Filmore's writings, the seeds he had planted had a much greater impact on the role of women in society.

Long-Term Impact

Although the notion of republican motherhood initially encouraged women to pursue less of a public role, it eventually resulted in increased educational opportunities for American women, as typified by Mary Lyon and the founding in 1837 of Mount Holyoke Female Seminary which would later become Mount Holyoke College. It produced an initiative and independence that, Kerber says, was "one side of an inherently paradoxical ideology of republican motherhood that legitimized political sophistication and activity." The abolitionist movement, which blossomed in the 1830s and 1840s, found many of its strongest and most dedicated voices in educated Northern women. The Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, which began the Women's Rights movement in the United States, also likely owes some of its origin to the emphasis on republican motherhood of fifty years before.

Equality or Inequality?

Historians are divided on the question of whether republican motherhood implied that women were on a path towards political equality at the founding of the United States, or whether it signified a new but subservient role for women in the new republic. The idea of a mother as a key force in the preservation and advancement of democracy can be seen as elevating women to status as politically vital citizens, but it can equally be seen as a reinforcement of traditional women's roles (merely focusing more on republican ideals in the education taking place in the home).

Letters of Abagail and John Adams

John Adams (1735-1826), second President of the United States, and Abigail Smith Adams (1744-1818) exchanged over 1,100 letters, beginning during their courtship in 1762 and continuing throughout John's political career (until 1801). These warm and informative letters include John's descriptions of the Continental Congress and his impressions of Europe while he served in various diplomatic roles, as well as Abigail's updates about their family, farm, and news of the Revolution's impact on the Boston area.

(Abigail to John)
Saturday Evening February March 2, [1776]

I was greatly rejoiced at the return of your servant to find you had safely arrived, and that you were well. I had never heard a word from you after you left New york, and a most ridiculous story had been industiously propagated in this and the neighbouring Towns to injure the cause and blast your Reputation, viz. that you and your President had gone on board a Man of War from N-y and saild for England. I should not mention so idle a report, but that it had given uneasiness to some of your Friends, not that they in the least credited the report, but because the Gaping vulgar swallowed the story. One man had deserted them and proved a traitor, an other might &c. I assure you such high Disputes took place in the publick house of this parish, that some men were collerd and draged out of the shop, with great Threats for reporting such scandelous lies, and an unkle of ours offerd his life as a forfeit for you if the report proved true.

However it has been a nine days marvel and will now cease. I heartily wish every Tory was Extirpated [from] America, they are continually by secret means undermineing and injuring our cause.

I am charmed with the Sentiments of Common Sense; and wonder how an honest Heart, one who wishes the welfare of their country, and the happiness of posterity can hesitate one moment at adopting them; I want to know how those Sentiments are received in Congress? I dare say their would be no difficulty in procuring a vote and instructions from all the Assemblies in New England for independency. I most sincerely wish that now in the Lucky Minuet it might be done.
I have been kept in a continual state of anxiety and expectation ever since you left me. It has been said to morrow and to morrow for this month, but when the dreadfull to morrow will be I know not -- but hark! the House this instant shakes with the roar of Cannon. I have been to the door and find tis a cannonade from our Army, orders I find are come for all the remaining Militia to repair to the Lines a monday night by twelve o clock. No Sleep for me to Night; and if I cannot who have no guilt upon my Soul with regard to this Cause, how shall the misirible wretches who have been the procurers of this Dreadfull Scene and those who are to be the actors, lie down with the load of Guilt upon their Souls.

Sunday Eve March 3

I went to Bed after 12 but got no rest, the Cannon continued firing and my Heart Beat pace with them all night. We have had a pretty quiet day, but what to morrow will bring forth God only knows.

Monday Evening

Tolerable quiet to day. The Militia have all mustered with 3 days provision and are all march'd by 8 o clock this afternoon tho their notice was no longer than 8 o clock Saturday, and now we have scarily a Man but our regular guards either in W. [Weymouth], H. [Hingham] or B. [Braintree] or M. [Milton] and the Militia from the more remote towns are call'd in as Sea coast Guards. Can you form to yourself an Idea of our Sensations. [Palmer] is chief [Colonel], [Bass] is Leit. [Colonel] and [Soper] Major and Hall Captain.

I have just returnd from [Penn's] Hill where I have been sitting to hear the amazing roar of cannon and from whence I could see every shell which was been thrown. The sound I think is one of the Grandest in Nature and is of the true Species of the Sublime. Tis now an incessant Roar. But O the fatal Ideas which are connected with the sound. How many of our dear country men must fall?

Twesday morning

I went to bed about 12 and rose again a little after one. I could no more sleep than if I had been in the ingagement. The ratling of the windows, the jar of the house and the continual roar of 24 pounders, the Bursting of shells give us such Ideas, and realize a scene to us of which we could scarcely form any conception. About Six this morning, there was quiet; I rejoiced in a few hours calm. I hear we got possession of Dorchester Hill Last Night. 4 000 thousand men upon it to day -- lost but one Man. The Ships are all drawn round the Town. To night we shall realize a more terible scene still. I sometimes think I cannot stand it -- I wish myself with you, out of the hearing as I cannot assist them. I hope to give you joy of Boston, even if it is in ruins before I send this away. -- I am too much agitated to write as I ought, and languid for want of rest.

Thursday Fast day

All my anxiety, and distress, is at present at an End. I feel dissapointed. This day our Militia are all returning, without effecting any thing more than taking possession of Dorchester Hill. I hope it is wise and just, but from all the Muster and Stir I hoped and expected more important and decisive Scenes; I would not have sufferd all I have for two such Hills. Ever since the taking of that we have had a perfect calm nor can I learn yet what Effect it has had in Town Boston. I do not hear of one persons escaping since.

I was very much pleased with your choise of a committe for Canada. All those to whom I have venturnd to shew that part of your Letter approve the Scheme of the Priest as a master stroke of policy. I feel sorry that [General] Lee has left us, but his presence at New York was no doubt of great importance as we have reason to think it prevented Clinton from landing and gathering together such a nest of virmin as would at least have distressd us greatly. But how can you spair him from there? Can you make his place good -- can you supply it with a man equelly qualified to save us? How do the Virginians realish the Troops said to be destined for them? Are they putting themselves into a State of Defence? I inclose to you a Copy of a Letter sent by Capt. Furnace [Furnass] who is in Mr. Ned Churchs imploy and who came into the Cape about 10 days ago. You will learn the Sentiments of our Cousin by it, some of which may be true, but I hope he is a much better divine than politician.

I hear in one of his Letters he mentions certain intercepted Letters which he says have made much Noise in England, and Laments that you ever wrote them.

What will he and others say to Common Sense? I cannot Bear to think of your continuing in a State of Supineness this winter.
"There is a tide in the affairs of Men
Which taken, at the flood leads on to fortune;
omitted, all the voyage of their life
is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat;
And we must take the current when it serves,
or lose our ventures."

Shakespear

**Sunday Eve March 10**

I had scarcely finished these lines when my Ears were again assaulted with the roar of Cannon. I could not write any further. My Hand and heart will tremble, at this domestick fury, and fierce civil Strife, which cumber all our parts. Tho, Blood and destruction are so much in use
And Dreadfull objects so familiar,
Yet is not pitty chok'd, nor my Heart grown Callous. I feel for the unhappy wretches who know not where to fly for safety. I feel still more for my Bleeding Country men who are hazarding their lives and their Limbs. -- A most Terible and incessant Cannonade from half after 8 till Six this morning. I hear we lost four men kill'd and some wounded in attempting to take the Hill nearest the Town call'd Nook Hill. We did some work, but the fire from [the ships Beat off our Men so that they did not secure it]
but retired to the fort upon the other Hill.
I have not got all the perticuliars I wish I had but, as I have an opportunity of sending this I shall endeavour to be more particular in my next.
All our Little ones send duty. Tommy has been very sick with what is call'd the Scarlet or purple fever, but has got about again.
If we have Reinforcements here, I believe we shall be driven from the sea coast, but in what so ever state I am I will endeavour to be therewith content.
Man wants but Little here below
Nor wants that Little long.
You will escuse this very incorrect Letter. You see in what purtubation it has been written and how many times I have left of. Adieu pray write me every opportunity. Yours.

_Tooks Grammer is the one you mention._

**(Abigail to John)**
**Braintree March 31, 1776**

I wish you would ever write me a Letter half as long as I write you; and tell me if you may where your Fleet are gone? What sort of Defence Virginia can make against our common Enemy? Whether it is so situated as to make an able Defence? Are not the Gentery Lords and the common people vassals, are they not like the uncivilized Natives Brittain represents us to be? I hope their Riffel Men who have shewn themselves very savage and even Blood thirsty; are not a specimen of the Generality of the people.

I am willing to allow the Colony great merrit for having produced a Washington but they have been shamefully duped by a Dunmore.

I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be Eaquelly Strong in the Breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs. Of this I am certain that it is not founded upon that generous and christian principal of doing to others as we would that others should do unto us.
Do not you want to see Boston; I am fearfull of the small pox, or I should have been in before this time. I got Mr. Crane to go to our House and see what state it was in. I find it has been occupied by one of the Doctors of a Regiment, very dirty, but no other damage has been done to it. The few things which were left in it are all gone. Cranch has the key which he never deliverd up. I have wrote to him for it and am determined to get it clean as soon as possible and shut it up. I look upon it a new acquisition of property, a property which one month ago I did not value at a single Shilling, and could with pleasure have seen it in flames.

The Town in General is left in a better state than we expected, more owing to a percipitate flight than any Regard to the inhabitants, tho some individuals discoverd a sense of honour and justice and have left the rent of the Houses in which they were, for the owners and the furniture unhurt, or if damaged sufficent to make it good.

Others have committed abominable Ravages. The Mansion House of your President is safe and the furniture unhurt whilst both the House and Furniture of the Solisiter General have fallen a prey to their own merciless party. Surely the very Fiends feel a Reverential awe for Virtue and patriotism, whilst they Detest the paricide and traitor.

I feel very differently at the approach of spring to what I did a month ago. We knew not then whether we could plant or sow with safety, whether when we had toild we could reap the fruits of our own industriy, whether we could rest in our own Cottages, or whether we should not be driven from the sea coasts to seek shelter in the wilderness, but now we feel as if we might sit under our own vine and eat the good of the land.

I feel a gaieti de Coar to which before I was a stranger. I think the Sun looks brighter, the Birds sing more melodiously, and Nature puts on a more cheerfull countenance. We feel a temporary peace, and the poor fugitives are returning to their deserted habitations.

Tho we felicitate ourselves, we sympathize with those who are trembling lest the Lot of Boston should be theirs. But they cannot be in similar circumstances unless pusilanimity and cowardise should take possession of them. They have time and warning given them to see the Evil and shun it. -- I long to hear that you have declared an independency -- and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the

Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity. Men of Sense in all Ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your Sex. Regard us then as Beings placed by providence under your protection and in imitation of the Supreem Being make use of that power only for our happiness.

April 5

Not having an opportunity of sending this I shall add a few lines more; tho not with a heart so gay. I have been attending the sick chamber of our Neighbour Trot whose affliction I most sensibly feel but cannot discribe, striped of two lovely children in one week. Gorge the Eldest died on wednesday and Billy the youngest on fryday, with the Canker fever, a terrible disorder so much like the throat distemper, that it differs but little from it. Betsy Cranch has been very bad, but upon the recovery. Becky Peck they do not expect will live out the day. Many grown persons are now sick with it, in this street 5. It rages much in other Towns. The Mumps too are very frequent. Isaac is now confined with it. Our own little flock are yet well. My Heart trembles with anxiety for them. God preserve them.

I want to hear much oftener from you than I do. March 8 was the last date of any that I have yet had. -- You inquire of whether I am making Salt peter. I have not yet attempted it, but after Soap making believe I shall make the experiment. I find as much as I can do to manufacture cloathing for my family which would else be Naked. I know of but one person in this part of the Town who has made any, that is Mr. Tertias Bass as he is calld who has got very near an hundred weight which has been found to be very good. I have heard of some others in the other parishes. Mr. Reed of Weymouth has been applied to, to go to Andover to the mills which are now at work, and has gone. I have lately seen a small Manuscrip describing the proportions for the various sorts of powder which would be Naked. If it would be of any Service your way I will get it transcribed and send it to you. -- Every one of your Friends send their Regards, and all the little ones. Your Brothers youngest child lies bad with convulsion fitts. Adieu. I need not say how much I am Your ever faithfull Friend.
You justly complain of my short Letters, but the critical State of Things and the Multiplicity of Avocations must plead my Excuse. You ask where the Fleet is. The inclosed Papers will inform you. You ask what Sort of Defence Virginia can make. I believe they will make an able Defence. Their Militia and minute Men have been some time employed in training their selves, and they have Nine Battalions of regulars as they call them, maintained among them, under good Officers, at the Continental Expence. They have set up a Number of Manufactories of Fire Arms, which are busily employed. They are tolerably supplied with Powder, and are successfull and assiduous, in making Salt Petre. Their neighbouring Sister or rather Daughter Colony of North Carolina, which is a warlike Colony, and has several Battalions at the Continental Expence, as well as a pretty good Militia, are ready to assist them, and they are in very good Spirits, and seem determined to make a brave Resistance. -- The Gentry are very rich, and the common People very poor.

This Inequality of Property, gives an Aristocratical Turn to all their Proceedings, and occasions a strong Aversion in their Patricians, to Common Sense. But the Spirit of these Barons, is coming down, and it must submit.

It is very true, as you observe they have been duped by Dunmore. But this is a Common Case. All the Colonies are duped, more or less, at one Time and another. A more egregious Bubble was never blown up, than the Story of Commissioners coming to treat with the Congress. Yet it has gained Credit like a Charm, not only without but against the clearest Evidence. I never shall forget the Delusion, which seized our best and most sagacious Friends the dear Inhabitants of Boston, the Winter before last. Credulity and the Want of Foresight, are Imperfections in the human Character, that no Politician can sufficiently guard against.

You have given me some Pleasure, by your Account of a certain House in Queen Street. I had burned it, long ago, in Imagination. It rises now to my View like a Phoenix. -- What shall I say of the Solicitor General? I pity his pretty Children, I pity his

Father, and his sisters. I wish I could be clear that it is no moral Evil to pity him and his Lady. Upon Repentance they will certainly have a large Share in the Compassions of many. But let Us take Warning and give it to our Children. Whenever Vanity, and Gaiety, a Love of Pomp and Dress, Furniture, Equipage, Buildings, great Company, expensive Diversions, and elegant Entertainments get the better of the Principles and Judgments of Men or Women there is no knowing where they will stop, nor into what Evils, natural, moral, or political, they will lead us.

Your Description of your own Gaiety de Coeur, charms me. Thanks be to God you have just Cause to rejoice -- and may the bright Prospect be obscured by no Cloud.

As to Declarations of Independency, be patient. Read our Privateering Laws, and our Commercial Laws. What signifies a Word.

As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient -- that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent -- that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters.

But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented. -- This is rather too coarse a Compliment but you are so saucy, I wont blot it out.

Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Altho they are in full Force, you know they are little more than Theory. We dare not exert our Power in its full Latitude. We are obliged to go fair, and softly, and in Practice you know We are the subjects. We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would compleatly subject Us to the Despotism of the Peticot, I hope General Washington, and all our brave Heroes would fight. I am sure every good Politician would plot, as long as he would against Despotism, Empire, Monarchy, Aristocracy, Oligarchy, or Ochlocracy. -- A fine Story indeed. I begin to think the Ministry as deep as they are wicked. After stirring up Tories, Landjobbers, Trimmers, Bigots, Canadians, Indians, Negroes, Hanoverians, Hessians, Russians, Irish Roman Catholicks, Scotch Renegadoes, at last they have stimulated the to demand new Privilidges and threaten to rebell.

(Abigail to John)

Braintree May 7, 1776
How many are the solitary hours I spend, ruminating upon the past, and anticipating the future, whilst you overwhelmd with the cares of State, have but few moments you can devote to any individual. All domestick pleasures and injoyments are absorbed in the great and important duty you owe your Country "for our Country is as it were a secondary God, and the First and greatest parent. It is to be preferred to Parents, Wives, Children, Friends and all things the Gods only excepted. For if our Country perishes it is as imposible to save an Individual, as to preserve one of the fingers of a Mortified Hand." Thus do I supress every wish, and silence every Murmer, acquiescing in a painfull Separation from the companion of my youth, and the Friend of my Heart. 

I believe tis near ten days since I wrote you a line. I have not felt in a humour to entertain you. If I had taken up my pen perhaps some unbecoming invective might have fallen from it; the Eyes of our Rulers have been closed and a Lethargy has seazd almost every Member. I fear a fatal Security has taken possession of them. Whilst the Building is on flame they tremble at the expence of water to quench it, in short two months has elapsed since the evacuation of Boston, and very little has been done in that time to secure it, or the Harbour from future invasion till the people are all in a flame; and no one among us that I have heard of even mentions expence, they think universally that there has been an amaizing neglect some where. Many have turnd out as volunteers to work upon Nodles Island, and many more would go upon Nantaskit if it was once set on foot. "Tis a Maxim of state That power and Liberty are like Heat and moisture; where they are well mixt every thing prospers, where they are single, they are destructive." 

A Goverment of more Stability is much wanted in this colony, and they are ready to receive them it from the Hands of the Congress, and since I have begun with Maxims of State I will add an other viz. that a people may let a king fall, yet still remain a people, but if a king let his people slip from him, he is no longer a king. And as this is most certainly our case, why not proclaim to the World in decisive terms your own importance? 

Shall we not be dispiced by foreign powers for hesitateing so long at a word? 

I can not say that I think you very generous to the Ladies, for whilst you are proclaiming peace and good will to Men, Emancipating all Nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power over Wives. But you must remember that Arbitary power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken -- and notwithstanding all your wise Laws and Maxims we have it in our power not only to free ourselves but to subdue our Masters, and without voilence throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet. 

"Charm by accepting, by submitting sway
Yet have our Humour most when we obey."

I thank you for several Letters which I have received since I wrote Last. They alleviate a tedious absence, and I long earnestly for a Saturday Evening, and experience a similar pleasure to that which I used to find in the return of my Friend upon that day after a weeks absence. The Idea of a year dissolves all my Phyllosphy. 

Our Little ones whom you so often recommend to my care and instruction shall not be deficient in virtue or probity if the precepts of a Mother have their desired Effect, but they would be doubly inforced could they be indulged with the example of a Father constantly before them; I often point them to their Sire 

"engaged in a corrupted State
Wrestling with vice and faction."

May 9

I designd to have finished the sheet, but an opportunity offering I close only just inform you that May the 7 our privateers took two prises in the Bay in fair sight of the Man of war, one a Brig from Irland the other from fyall loaded with wine Brandy and the other Beaf &c. The wind was East and a flood tide, so that the tenders could not get out tho they tried several times, the Light house fired Signal guns, but all would not do, they took them in triumph and carried them into Lyn.Johnny and Charls have the Mumps, a bad disorder, but they are not very bad. Pray be kind enough to remember me at all times and write as often as you possibly can to your Portia.