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Republican Motherhood, the American Revolution, and the Persistence of Memory: The Legacy of the Livingston Daughters

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Abstract

What is known about women during the American Revolution is often viewed through the lens of “Republican Motherhood.” However, a closer examination of the historical record reveals women who were able to use their positions as wives, mothers, and daughters to influence the war, while still maintaining their prescribed roles in society. In doing so, they began to shape the way in which they would be remembered. The Livingston women, daughters of William Livingston, New Jersey’s first elected governor, serve as a case study for understanding the roles played by women during such a pivotal time in history and how they survive in historical memory. In particular, I analyze the story of the Livingston women as told at their ancestral home, Liberty Hall Museum. The Museum highlights their manipulation of British officers in support of the Patriot cause, including the Livingston co-opting of the ghost of Hannah Caldwell, a local civilian killed by British officers during the Battle of Connecticut Farms. An analysis of this ghost story, along with others told about the Livingston daughters, provides a new perspective of women’s roles during the Revolution in the context of “Republican Motherhood.”

Keywords: Republican Motherhood, Livingston, Liberty Hall, Hannah Caldwell

In the summer of 1780, British troops began a march from Staten Island to Elizabethtown

Point, New Jersey, but encountered American militia of the New Jersey Continental line, causing the two armies to fight through the small town of Connecticut Farms on June 7. The Battle of Connecticut Farms was one of the last battles fought on the northern front during the American Revolution and the battle's memory has been marked by the notorious actions of the British and Hessian troops involved (Smith 1). An article in "The New Jersey Gazette," published a few weeks after the battle, on June 21, stated that the British officers had burned the houses of widows, had raped a young girl, and that "the distress occasioned by their devastation is too shocking to reflect on" (3). However, their most notable action, and what the battle is most known for, was the murder of Hannah Caldwell (Smith 1).

James Caldwell was the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Elizabethtown, NJ, who had joined the Continental Army and acted as the chaplain for the New Jersey line. In January of 1780, Loyalists burned down his church and house in Elizabethtown and he moved his family to Connecticut Farms. On June 7, when the British and Hessian troops were marching through and devastating the town, Hannah Caldwell, the wife of the reverend, was in the parsonage with a nurse, a housekeeper, and her two youngest children (Smith). An account of her death published in "The New Jersey Gazette" stated that British soldiers, "had burnt Mr. Caldwell's house, after shooting his wife thro' a window as she was sitting on her bed, with a brace of balls; one entered her left breast, and the other her waist" (3). Many speculated that her murder was a deliberate attack against the Caldwell family, as eyewitness accounts of the time claimed an officer almost shot another civilian woman who he had mistaken to be Mrs. Caldwell ("The Pennsylvania Packet" 3). The British, however, claimed the incident was no more than a tragic accident (Smith). Nevertheless, Caldwell's death started a call for vengeance from the Patriot troops. A poem about Caldwell, published in the "Pennsylvania Journal" in October of

1780, reflected such sentiments stating, “If -- a lover of thy country thou wilt depart from this spot, consecrated to her dust, filled with eternal heartfelt horror at the execrated name of a Briton” (1).

On the same night of Hannah Caldwell’s death, just a few miles away in Elizabethtown, in their home at Liberty Hall, the wife and daughters of New Jersey’s first elected governor, William Livingston, were surprised by the arrival of intoxicated British soldiers. A story of the night’s events was included in *A Memoir of the Life of William Livingston*, written by Theodore Sedgwick, a contemporary of the Livingstons and a family friend. Although Mrs. Livingston and her daughters attempted to hide from the soldiers, the men of the house being away at the time, they were quickly discovered. However, when a man attempted to grab one of the Livingston daughters, she grabbed his collar and, at the same moment, a flash of lightning lit up the hall. The soldier, fearing that he had seen a ghost allegedly screamed, “God! it’s Mrs. Caldwell that we killed today,” and the men fled from the house (Sedgwick, 354). Another account of the night’s events, found in Margaret Truman’s *Women of Courage*, stated that it was Susan Livingston, the oldest daughter, who had confronted the soldier. In her account, however, Truman claimed that Susan had been the aggressor in the situation, coming out of hiding and grabbing the soldier's collar unprovoked. While Truman did not discuss Hannah Caldwell, she did include the flash of lightning and the intoxicated soldier’s belief that he had seen a ghost. In addition, she claimed that Susan followed the man in his retreat down the stairs and that she had reprimanded the soldiers, calling them “cowards, barbarians, and criminals” (39). This ghost story is still told by the Liberty Hall Museum, which exists in what was the family home, and a painting of Hannah Caldwell sits behind a door on the second floor of the house, to commemorate the event. Although it is unknown whether or not the story is true, its perpetuation

is a reflection of the ways in which we remember prominent women of the Revolutionary era. In addition, while the Livingston daughters influenced the Revolution very differently than Hannah Caldwell, whose death acted as a call to arms for many Patriots, the stories that survive about the Livingston daughters offer insight into the roles played by women during a pivotal time in history. Therefore, an analysis of these stories provides a new perspective of women's roles during the Revolution in the context of "republican motherhood," and also acts as a reflection of the ways in which women are showcased in the historical memory.

Some of the great Enlightenment thinkers, like Montesquieu and Rousseau, believed that women needed to be confined to a fixed domestic realm so that they could maintain their private virtue (Landes 23). The idea of republican motherhood defined the roles of women during the American Revolution and in the foundation of the early United States. The ideology stemmed from the idea that, although women could not participate in the same roles as men, specifically as political leaders, they were essential for social progress (Zagarri 194). Men, as they had since the colonial era, acted as the head of the family and the family's connection to those who governed society (Norton 38). Women, however, were charged with educating their sons, and at times correcting their husbands, in matters of civic virtue. Therefore, republican motherhood "preserved traditional gender roles at the same time that it carved out a new, political role for women" (Zagarri 192). In this way, although views of women had been confined to the domestic sphere, as wives, mothers, and daughters, these roles were what brought them to the forefront of the new nation, which emphasized the home "as pivotal to the fate of the republic" (Nash 172).

Despite the belief that women were crucial in maintaining the republic, the distinctions between public and private lives also present throughout the revolutionary era made it clear that women were expected to remain in the private aspects of lives and that their influence should not

extend beyond the home (Norton 405). This need to privatize women's roles likely stemmed from the belief that women were meant to be kept innocent and pure (Landes 21). In addition, the ideals may have been inspired by depictions of Spartan mothers: "Women of the early American republic would contribute to the martial nation at home, as the image of the resolute Spartan mother preparing her sons for war won out as the preferred model of feminine behavior" (Martino 150). Nevertheless, women worked tirelessly to support the Revolution, while still maintaining their roles. They participated in boycotts, made supplies for soldiers, ran the businesses of their husbands that had joined the army, fed and housed soldiers, and ultimately used republican motherhood to "combine domesticity with political and civil roles" (Nash 172). In addition, the idea that women were expected to raise the future generations of male leaders also led to the belief that women should be educated, so that they could properly teach their sons how to be good citizens (Zagarri 206). While this ultimately raised the social status of women, it also perpetuated the gender roles that had already been established and women were expected to be lovely and accomplished, which, it was perceived, they could not do if they entered the political sphere of women (Zagarri 207). In this way, despite the new emphasis placed on their roles, women continued to be confined to the domestic sphere. As Joan B. Landes stated in "Women and the Public Sphere: A Modern Perspective," women were meant to be "beneficiaries of historical progress," and that "women were never seen as the creators of their own fate, as historical actors" (21-22). Some women, however, were able to use these roles to their advantage, particularly to influence the Revolution.

The Livingston daughters played a prominent role in society during the Revolution, participating in many parties and social gatherings (Tobin 37). In addition, they were educated, having been taught "reading, writing, dancing, sewing and embroidery, knitting and darning,

politeness and etiquette, along with the standards of household management.” In alignment with the virtues of republican motherhood, they were also taught “modesty, manners, loyalty and steadfastness” (Tobin 27). Letters written by the Livingston women throughout the Revolutionary era reflect not only their support for the Patriot cause, but also their belief in the perpetuation of virtue and morality (Janson 34). For example, in a letter from Sarah Livingston Jay to her father, William Livingston, in March of 1781, she wrote “certain I am that victory will one day give to the Americans that liberty they have had the virtue to defend,” (Morris 177-180). While such letters are representative of ways in which republican motherhood upheld virtuous behavior, they are also examples of how the Livingston women stepped outside of their spheres. As Janson stated in *Sarah Livingston Jay, 1756-1802: Dynamics of Power, Privilege and Prestige in the Revolutionary Era*, “to comment openly about politics was stepping outside the bounds set for women in the eighteenth century,” (34).

Sarah Livingston Jay spent most of the Revolution in Europe. In fact, she was the only wife of a diplomat to travel abroad during wartime. Throughout that time, she fulfilled her domestic duties, made personal sacrifices for the war effort, and hosted social events and entertainment, all of which were expected of the ideal wife and mother. However, at the same time, she developed an understanding of politics and may have exerted her own influence through her husband (Janson 75). In fact, regarding the relationship between Sarah and John Jay, Diego de Gardoqui, a Spanish diplomat and contemporary who encountered the couple when they were abroad, stated “This woman, whom he loves blindly, dominates him and nothing is done without her consent, so that her opinion prevails” (Roberts 165). This is an indication that not only did Sarah Livingston Jay have an influence over her husband, but that her influence was recognized by other diplomats and politicians.

During the Revolution, William Livingston's wife, Susannah, and their daughters, were very active in supporting the war effort on the home front as well. Susan Livingston, for example, created her own drink, a combination of strawberries and Chinese tea, to support the boycott of British tea (Tobin 37). Furthermore, they continued to attend balls and participated in various forms of entertainment, as women of their social status were expected to. Kitty Livingston would even dine at army camps with officers like Knox and Washington (Tobin 42-43). In addition, the women, Sarah excluded as she was abroad, would often stay at Liberty Hall, even when the men of the family were away. As a result, they were often subject to raids, theft, and mistreatment by the British (Tobin 44). They were particularly targeted because of William Livingston's position as governor of New Jersey and brigadier general, which led to many attempts to either kidnap him or steal his papers (Truman 31). Because of this, Livingston often expressed his fears for his wives and daughters when he was away from them. For example, on June 9, 1780, just a few days after the Battle of Connecticut Farms and death of Hannah Caldwell, Livingston wrote to his wife, "My anxiety for you and the children has been inexpressible, and I have had a most miserable night of it upon your account. Our house and every thing in it is doubtless gone, the loss of which, great as it is, I should be able to bear fortitude, but the thought of your situation, and that of the poor girls, cuts me to the heart" (Sedgwick 350). However, despite the great dangers of staying at Liberty Hall, the Hannah Caldwell ghost story is a reflection of the great strength exhibited by the Livingston women during a very difficult time. While it is unclear whether or not the story is true, given the countless raids of Liberty Hall and the tragedies faced by women throughout New Jersey, which the Livingston women certainly knew about, staying at Liberty Hall for as long as they did required strength and bravery (Tobin 47).

While the Hannah Caldwell ghost story is a reflection of the bravery exhibited by the Livingston women throughout the Revolution, there are other stories that showcase the ways in which they used the framework of republican motherhood both to their advantages and to help the war effort. In one story, Susan Livingston encountered a British Colonel on the property and bluntly asked if he intended to burn the house. The Colonel, who knew of Susan's reputation as one of the Three Graces, along with her sisters Kitty and Sarah, promised that he had no such intention. To prove his good will, he even stationed officers along the property to protect it. To thank him, Susan offered him a rose and stated that, should he remain in New Jersey for a while, he should call on her (Truman 36). An article in the *Rivington Gazette* from June 29, 1780, also confirmed this story, stating that British troops had protected the house from the fires being set throughout Elizabethtown and that one of the officers had "received a rose from Miss Susan L., as a pledge of protection, and a memorandum of a request of a safe-guard" (Sedgewick 352). In addition, while it would not have been appropriate for the officer to call upon Susan as a possible suitor, her supposed request is an example of Susan's charm and a reflection of the many men who would travel great distances to act as potential suitors for the Livingston daughters (Tobin 37). In this way, Susan's actions are a reflection not only of her social status, but also of her ability to use her femininity to influence British officers, who were enemies of her father, to protect her.

Because of William Livingston's position, British officers would often attack Liberty Hall in the hope of capturing him (Tobin 48). From one of these attempts, another story of the Livingston girls arose. Frustrated that they had not found William Livingston at home to capture him, the British soldiers decided to search the house for crucial documents (Truman 32). When the soldiers found a box that contained Livingston's correspondence with General George

Washington, one of his daughters claimed that the box contained her private property and requested that a guard be placed over the box so that no one would be able to look through it (Sedgwick 323). Margaret Truman's account of these events, found in *Women of Courage*, stated that Susan was the daughter in question and that she appealed to the soldier's gentlemanliness. Because a gentleman would never go through a lady's personal belongings, the soldier agreed not to touch the box, as long as Susan pointed his men towards Livingston's paper (34). In this case, Susan relied on the virtuous aspects of republican motherhood, asking the officer not to betray her modesty. In addition, she appealed to the chivalric nature held by many of the British soldiers (Tobin 49). Ultimately, the soldiers left with bags of old, useless legal documents and Livingston's correspondence and war strategies were left untouched.

In each of these accounts, the Livingston women used their roles in different ways. However, in each case, the main goal was to protect Liberty Hall, which was both their home and the location of many of William Livingston's important war documents. While Susan is often depicted as the protagonist in these stories, many accounts simply include a Livingston daughter and do not provide a name. Therefore, the attributes depicted in the stories can be applied to any of the Livingston women and, as they are reflections of the widespread ideal of republican motherhood, they can also be applied to many women of the Revolutionary era. The first story, in which a Livingston girl took the form of Hannah Caldwell's ghost and scared away the intoxicated British soldiers, is a reflection of the bravery and strength held by those who remained home while their husbands, sons, fathers, and brothers were off fighting in the war. Although each story included a kind of confrontation with a British officer, which required bravery in most cases, Truman's version, in which Susan made the first move against the soldiers

and continued to yell at them as they fled from the house, is a direct reflection of the determination of the women who were left to defend themselves at home (39).

The other two stories, while not as focused on the aspect of bravery, highlight the ideals of republican motherhood. In both cases, Susan used her femininity to influence the soldiers. In addition, she relied on values of modesty, chivalry, and manners, which were prevalent throughout the Revolution. Although she was considered their enemy, Susan had convinced the British soldiers to protect her, her family, her home, and key documents relating to strategies of the war. In addition, both stories dealt with her reputation, an important aspect of social status for women. In the first story, the officer had heard of Susan's reputation, which had made her offer of possible courtship appealing (Truman 36). In the second story, had the officer searched through what he was led to believe were personal letters, he would have undermined her modesty and, therefore, brought her reputation into question (Sedgwick 323). Therefore, in cases like these, the Livingston women were able to use their roles in the domestic sphere to their advantage. The officers had no reason to question their innocence and virtue and did not believe they could be deceived so easily by a woman. It was therefore the use of the ideals of republican motherhood by these women that not only allowed them to influence the war, but also to exhibit a kind of agency that they had previously been denied. In addition, while these stories may have been fabricated or exaggerated in their retellings throughout history, it was the actions of the Livingston women, and others like them, that inspired such stories to arise and to continue to be told. In this way, it was the actions of the Livingston women that, while remaining in their domestic sphere and without threatening the roles they were placed into by their male counterparts, cemented their role in historical memory as strong and influential women.

While the murder of Hannah Caldwell did not cement her in historical memory in the

same way that the Livingston girl stories had for them, her death was a reminder that no one was safe from the atrocities of war (Tobin 51). In one account of her death, it was reported that Caldwell had told her housekeeper and maid that they would be safe from the attacks in the town because they had the two babies with them and it was expected that the British troops, known for their chivalry, would not harm a mother (Smith). As Tobin stated, women were expected to “retain their domestic identities, their softness and ladylike manners, while their husbands, brothers, fathers and sons fought the war literally around their homes. As the war continued, it was not realistic for all women to continue in the passive role ascribed them (51).” Some women participated in boycotts, others followed men to the battlefield to bring them supplies, and there were many who acted as spies (“Women in Battle”). Although the Livingston women did not participate as actively in these aspects, their ability to use their influence and roles to protect Liberty Hall is commendable. Because they belonged to a wealthy family and were in the public eye, William Livingston being the first governor of New Jersey, the Livingston women were expected to exemplify the virtues of republican motherhood and life in the domestic sphere. However, their positions also allowed them the opportunity to participate in the political sphere through their father and, eventually, their husbands. In this instance, the Livingston women are less like Molly Pitcher and could be more accurately compared to Martha Washington or Dolley Madison, who hosted extravagant parties that allowed their husbands to mingle and make connections and also, at times, had an influence over their husbands. In this way, the Livingston women, and other women of their social status, used their positions as a way to indirectly participate in politics (Lorton 62). Furthermore, the Liberty Hall Museum continues to tell these stories, which showcases their significance and persistence in the historical memory.

In Women at War in the Borderlands of the Early American Northeast, Gina Martino

discussed the ways in which republican motherhood impacted historical memory. In doing so, she discussed another ideology known as resolute motherhood. She stated, “an offshoot of ideologies of republican motherhood and feminine domesticity, resolute motherhood allowed authors to safely celebrate the war making of colonial women.” She went on to say that the ideals established by republican motherhood left women as second-class citizens, but that “accounts of women’s war making remained an integral part of local and regional histories throughout the eighteenth century” (137). Although Martino discussed several examples of women throughout New England who fit this model, it is also applicable to the Livingston women. Although they remained home throughout the Revolution, they were able to participate in a kind of war making of their own, using republican motherhood and feminine domesticity, rather than attempting to defy it. While their stories may not be as well-known as the story of Molly Pitcher, for example, their stories were and, through the Liberty Hall Museum, continue to be a part of the local and regional histories of New Jersey.

The ideal of a republican motherhood has persisted and evolved throughout history. For example, during World War I, “a new Republican Mother had emerged..., one anxious to participate in and support the nationalist dialogue in dramatically profound ways” (Budreau 87). In that time, women were attempting to document “a public history in which the ideals of republican motherhood spread beyond the home” (Budreau 91). In this way, although republican motherhood is often restricted to the eighteenth century and seen as a form of oppression, a way in which women were confined to the domestic sphere, the championing and expansion of its ideals during the twentieth century is a reflection of how perceptions of the ideology have evolved. This evolution has not only showcased the widespread significance of the institution, but has also allowed a reexamination of how women fit into roles of mother, daughter, and wife,

as defined by republican women. While some attempted to defy such roles, women like the Livingston daughters championed their positions. They were well educated and understood their position in society. They used their virtue, morals, and manners to their advantage, both socially and in ways that helped the war effort. Although they were not martyrs of the revolutionary cause, as Hannah Caldwell was, they did what they could to influence the war and their connection to women like Caldwell, even if only through a ghost story, is a reflection of their significance in the Revolutionary era. Therefore, as a case study of the roles of wives, mothers, and daughters during the Revolution, the Livingston women offer a new perspective of the ways in which women were able to influence the war, while maintaining their positions in the context of republican motherhood, and how they have been remembered for doing so.

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