The young women here enjoy a liberty: Philadelphia women and the public sphere, 1760s-1840s

Description

Title  "The young women here enjoy a liberty"
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Description  This dissertation examines women's access to and participation in the community life of Philadelphia in the decades surrounding the American Revolution. It argues against the application of separate spheres to late-colonial and early national Philadelphia and proposes that women were heavily integrated into nearly all aspects of the city's public life. Women from diverse backgrounds were actively involved in commerce, politics, protest, intellectual and legal debates, social institutions, wartime developments, educational advancements, and benevolent causes. They saw themselves and were viewed by their peers as valuable members of a vibrant and complex city life. If we put aside assumptions about women's limited relationship to the public sphere, we find a society in which women took advantage of a multitude of opportunities for participation and self-expression. This project also examines the disparity between the image of the ideal housewife and the lived experience of the majority of female Philadelphians. Idealized descriptions of Revolutionary women present a far more sheltered range of options than those taken advantage of by most actual women. This dissertation also challenges the traditional periodization of women's history from the late-colonial through the early national periods. Rather than seeing the Revolution as an aberration in women's access to the public sphere, this project demonstrates that women drew on pre-war experiences as they participated in revolutionary protests and conflicts, and then carried those lessons into the first decades of nationhood. Revolutionary rhetoric and social changes may have accelerated the rate at which female opportunities proliferated in the early 19th century, but those trends were already beginning in Philadelphia in the 1760s and 1770s. Women relied on past experience as they worked to expand the boundaries of their world. While it was not a fully linear progression, women's participation in the public sphere developed and increased from the 1760s through the 1840s: the way contemporaries understood women's place within local and national communities changed and women grew to far greater prominence by the antebellum period, but those developments were deeply rooted in the mid-to-late 18th century female experience, which was one of involvement and participation, rather than separation and limitation.
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