

Background on Women and Education

In the colonial period, economic opportunity was based heavily on one's education. Education often took the form of practical apprenticeships. But throughout the eighteenth century, increasing numbers of individuals began receiving formal schooling.⁽¹⁾ Since colleges had developed primarily as a means of training ministers and later lawyers, they were focused heavily on reading the Bible and classics of literature. Pre-collegiate education focused on many of the same subjects. While some of these subjects were not especially practical, they still provided graduates with a significant advantage in the job market. The ability to read documents—especially legal ones—and to perform some mathematical calculations were required skills for succeeding in business.

Widespread public education was slow to develop in the colonial period, even in New England where it was thought to be a priority. As far back as 1647, Massachusetts had enacted a law that required every town of fifty families or more to contribute funds through taxes to establish public schools. But this law was slow to affect the development of public schools, because most people were settled too far apart to support a school. As the population gradually increased, the number of people living in particular villages eventually grew large enough to support public education. By the early 1700s, public schools were beginning to be common, though their quality often remained very questionable.

Throughout the colonial period, education was generally based on gender. The predictable consequence was the significant gap in literacy between males and females. Education was costly to the family, even if no tuition was charged for attending, since children were not available to provide labor while they attended school. So it made little

sense to invest in educating girls, when their education would provide little financial benefit to the family. The common assumption was that education was a means of preparation for a role in public life. Women, by definition, were not a part of that public life. Many people also believed that females were intellectually inferior to males and probably could not—or should not—be educated in the same manner as males

Families that chose to educate their girls had a few options. One was to enroll girls in a “dame school.” These schools were usually run on an informal and impermanent basis by women who wanted to earn some income without making a significant financial investment. The teachers were often not well-educated themselves and, as a result sometimes offered little more than babysitting.

The American Revolution began to change the public’s ideas about women and education. Benjamin Rush, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, actively promoted education for women. He argued that a Republic, as America had become in breaking from the monarchy of England and establishing representative government, required informed, knowledgeable citizens to survive. This argument did not take hold immediately, but it did begin to change people’s thinking so that by the mid1800s, large numbers of women were being educated and some were even attending college.

(1) Kenneth A. Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England: An Enquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West* (New York, 1974), 50-51.