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Women's voices expand early in American history

BEDFORD – The image of women in early American history is often that of Betsy Ross sewing a flag or Molly Pitcher carrying water to parched Continental artillerymen.

But early American women had much more to say and do, according to three local historians. To prove the point, they compiled detailed, often first–person accounts of the lives of a cross–section of figures who, in part due to their gender, have graced the pages of few history books.

With "In the Words of Women–The Revolutionary War and the Birth of the Nation, 1765–1799," Janet Wedge of Ossining, Louise North of Yorktown and Landa Freeman of Guilford, Conn., mined original letters and other papers to assemble a chronological and thematic account of the country's formative years.

"This is not women's history," says Wedge, who taught history for two decades at Yorktown High School. "It's American history through women's eyes and voices, if you will. We didn't want the book to be termed feminist."

It isn't an academic tome, either, the authors say, though they expect it will be a popular campus resource. They envision it on nightstands and coffee tables, in the hands of ordinary readers gripped by the ideas of ordinary women living in extraordinary times.

Women like Mrs. Nathaniel Adams, a loyalist who testified in the court martial of a Continental soldier accused of destroying her Village Street home during the retreat from the Battle of White Plains.

"They terrorize this woman, whose husband is not home, and her children," says North, a docent at the Neuberger Museum at Purchase College, SUNY, "and they have to leave the house only with what they have on their backs. The soldiers take what they want, and they set the house on fire."

The story underscores how inhospitable Westchester's neutral ground was.

Another woman, Mary Totten of Cortlandt, petitioned George Washington in 1777 for compensation for damage done by his troops bivouacking on her property. It's unclear whether an army that could barely pay its soldiers ever settled with her.

And letters from Cornelia Van Cortlandt to her father, Pierre, detail how some of the family's slaves tried to escape and join the British cause. The letters reveal that the plot failed when one of the slaves turned on the

others, and the rest were watched closely thereafter.

"Each of them begins to have a personality distinct from the others," said Wedge. "You can get that from what they're writing and what they're thinking about and how they're behaving. It's interesting to see that they were individuals. Usually they're thought of in more collective terms in history, I think."

The authors, who discussed their book at the John C. Hart Memorial Library on Thursday, first worked together as volunteers at the John Jay Homestead in Katonah.

Their first collaboration is a book based on the letters of Jay and his wife, Sarah Livingston Jay. That experience sparked their interest in women of the period, and they found an abundance of material, much of it digitized and published online, on woman of all social ranks, loyalties and ages.

The book took six years to write. They traveled to libraries and historical societies from Boston to Philadelphia and to Columbia University's Rare Book and Transcript Library. Original documents were key to the process, as was their treatment of those documents.

"What I think has been done in the past, when there have been letters by women, bits are always taken from them to integrate into the book that's being written about the man," said Wedge, a former adjunct professor of creative writing at Manhattanville College. "And it's always how the woman fit with the man, and how it elucidates his actions. It's never from the woman's point of view."

The book represents 124 women. Some are well known, some less so. Benjamin Franklin's sister, Jane Mecom, wrote her brother often and outlived 11 of her 12 children.

"It's very sad," Wedge said. "Sometimes it's so wrenching to us when it seems to us that it wasn't quite so wrenching to them because the death of children was such a common occurrence then."

Mary Silliman, meanwhile, expressed an intimate longing for her husband, Connecticut militia leader Gold Silliman. When he was captured by the British, a Long Island judge was kidnapped and exchanged for him.

"She describes that in really wonderful language," North said.

The book opens with snapshots of detail about each woman so that readers can refer back without the narrative getting bogged down.

The women who populate these pages are strong, often opinionated and fully revealed as individuals.

Some were atrocious spellers, like Debra Franklin.

Some rely on the voices of others, including Mumbet, a former slave from Massachusetts who successfully sued for her freedom.

At a time when great men went off to war and did great things, these women were notable in their own right. Many stepped up in the absence of the men, just as later generations of women would do in wartime. And similarly, they resumed their traditional roles at war's end.

"What do we love about them?" says Freeman, a former Bedford resident. "That they're intelligent, humane, that they want the best for their families. They love their husbands, and they're willing to work really hard when their husbands are gone."

Caption: From left, Louise North, Janet Wedge and Landa Freeman stand in front of the John Jay Homestead in Katonah with the book they co-authored, "In the Words of Women: The Revolutionary War and the Birth of the Nation." frank becerra jr./the journal news
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