



REVOLUTIONARY IDEALS



HISTORY
OF
PHILIP'S WAR
COMMONLY
THE GREAT INDIAN WAR

Women's Coverture: Unpacking the Historical Context of Abigail Adams's call to "Remember the Ladies"

GUIDING QUESTION:

What was coverture? How did it affect women's social and legal status or position before the American Revolution?

CO-AUTHORS:

Kris Hart, Ardsley High School, Ardsley, New York
Deanna McDaniel, Genoa Middle School, Westerville, Ohio

► OVERVIEW

In colonial America, when a woman married she became almost entirely dependent on her husband through the principle of coverture. In this lesson, students will examine primary sources that illustrate the extent to which women's social and legal position adhered to this principle of coverture. Using Abigail Adams's famous letter in which she implored her husband, John, to "remember the ladies," students will analyze women's social and legal status and discuss how women challenged the system leading up to the American Revolution.

► OBJECTIVES

At the conclusion of this activity, students will be able to:

- › Describe the legal principle of coverture that existed in colonial America;
- › Explain women's social and legal position in colonial America before the Revolution using at least one example of coverture; and
- › Analyze how women challenged the system of coverture in America before the Revolution.

► STANDARDS CONNECTIONS

CONNECTIONS TO COMMON CORE

- › CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.3 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.
- › CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social science.

CONNECTIONS TO C3 FRAMEWORK

- › D3.1.9-12. Gather relevant information from multiple sources representing a wide range of views while using the origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the sources to guide the selection.

► DOCUMENTS USED

PRIMARY SOURCES

Advertisement, *Providence Gazette*, August 29, 1795
Rhode Island Historical Society

Advertisements, *Newport Mercury*, September 1765
Rhode Island Historical Society

Announcement, Henry Fulcker, *South-Carolina Gazette and Country Journal*, September 15, 1767
American Antiquarian Society
<https://adverts250project.org/2017/09/15/september-15-2/>

Letter, Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776 (excerpt)
Adams Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society
<https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17760331aa>

Petition, Ann Franklyn, Petition to the General Assembly, 1736
Rhode Island State Archives
https://sosri.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/IO_1fcd6fba-8d24-463f-bfa4-c2b12256b1c4/

► TEACHER-CREATED MATERIALS

- › Overview of Coverture and Women's Legal Status Handout
- › Sample "Graffiti" Analysis
- › Primary Source Packet

► ACTIVITY PREPARATION

- › Read the Overview of Coverture and Women's Legal Status Handout.
- › Gather the supplies needed for graffiti activity (colored pencils or pens).
- › Review the Sample "Graffiti" Analysis for teacher use.
- › Print one copy of the Primary Source Packet for each student.
- › Organize students into four groups (one for each primary source).

Students interested in this topic might be interested in researching the following for an NHD project:

- › **Ann Franklyn (Franklin), American colonial newspaper printer and publisher (1696–1763)**
- › **Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784)**
- › **Women's suffrage gained and lost in New Jersey (1776–1807)**
- › **Mercy Otis Warren (1728–1814)**

► PROCEDURE

ACTIVITY ONE (20 MINUTES)

- › Project for the class the letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams.
- › Model the "graffiti" strategy of interacting with the primary source. As you work through this as a class, ask students:
 - » *Who are the "ancestors" that Abigail Adams refers to?*
 - » *How much power was in the "hands of husbands?"*
 - » *Why did Abigail Adams write this letter?*
- › Project and read the Overview of Coverture and Women's Legal Status with the class.
- › Explain the concept of coverture and how it originates from English Common Law and was a commonly held legal and social construct in colonial America before the American Revolution.
- › Ask students: *What does this document reveal to us about women's legal status in the English colonies before the American Revolution? How do you think coverture affected the lives of women in this era?*
- › Moderate a brief discussion.

ACTIVITY TWO (30 MINUTES)

- › Explain to students that they are now going to take a look at how coverture worked in practice in the colonial and pre-Revolutionary era by examining four primary sources provided in the Primary Source Packet.
- › Organize students into four groups and assign a different primary source to each group. Distribute the Primary Source Packet.
- › Read and graffiti each source. As student groups graffiti their primary source, encourage them to work together using the model.
- › Have each group share their document with the class. Project each document as students share their analysis and have the class record the findings in their packets. Ask groups:
 - » *What did you discover about the woman referred to in your document?*
 - » *What does your document reveal about the status or treatment of women during this time period?*
 - » *Is the woman in this document accepting or resisting coverture?*
- › Discuss the extent to which coverture impacted women's lives and status with the class.
 - » *What were the expectations that women were living under in British North American colonies during this time period?*
 - » *What strategies did seventeenth and eighteenth century women employ to challenge coverture?*
 - » *How were these principles deployed across various racial, ethnic, or class groups?*
 - » *Do you think that women's social or legal status will change after American independence?*

ASSESSMENT OPTIONS

- › Write a letter to your congressional delegate or local newspaper describing the principle of women's coverture, and explain how this has impacted women's social and legal position in the colonial era. Each letter should include two or more lesson-specific vocabulary and examples from at least two primary sources.
- › Create a social media post or poster that explains and challenges women's coverture using one or more primary sources from the lesson. Students should include #remembertheladies and two or more additional content-specific vocabulary words from the lesson.

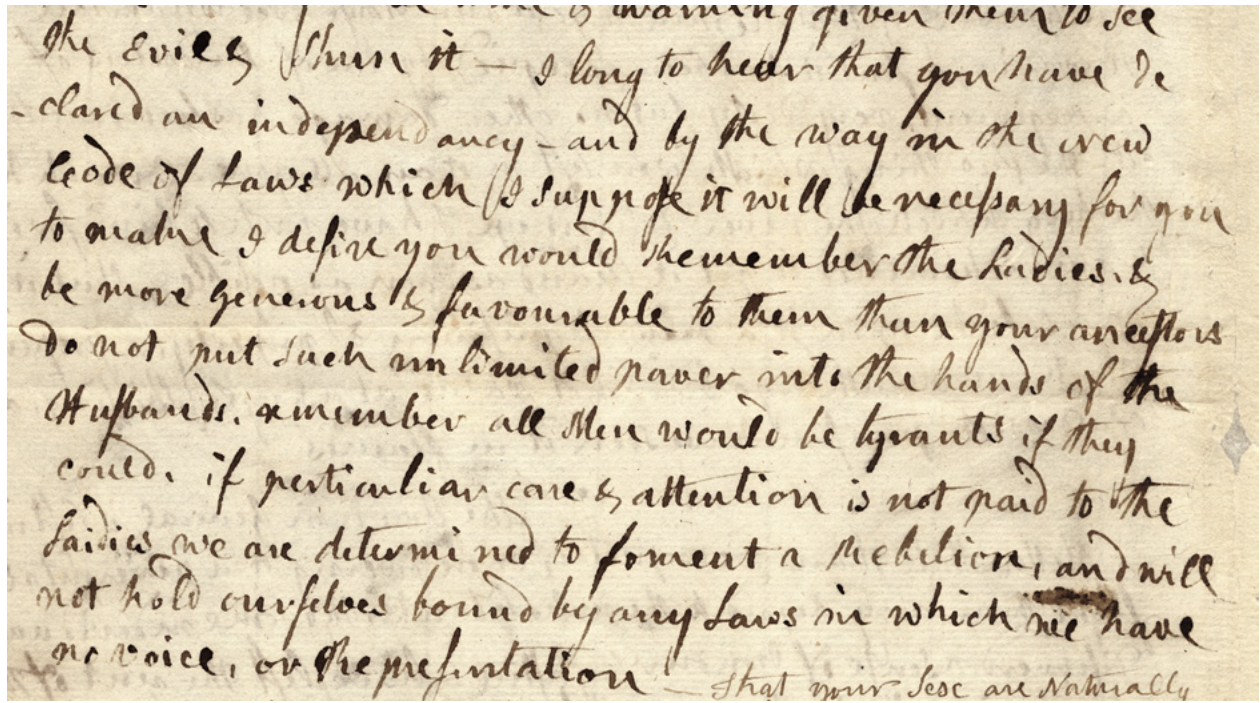
To access a PDF containing all of the sources and materials to complete this lesson plan, go to: nhd.org/RevIdeals.

Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776

Letter, Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776 (excerpt)

Adams Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society

<https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17760331aa>

A photograph of a handwritten letter on aged, yellowed paper. The handwriting is in cursive, written in dark ink. The text is a portion of a letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, dated March 31, 1776. The paper shows signs of wear, including creases and discoloration. The text is written in a fluid, connected script typical of the 18th century.

the evils, I think 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, & be more generous & 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 & attention is not paid to the Ladies 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 our Sex are Naturally

Transcription:

“ . . . 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 [favorable] 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 perticular [particular] care and attention is not paid to the Laidies [Ladies] we are determined to foment a Rebellion [Rebellion], and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation. . . ”

Sample “Graffiti” Analysis

Letter, Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776 (excerpt)
Adams Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society

What was she referring to? Ex?

Constitution??

Want women's equality/rights?

Who is she referring to?

demand or threat?

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 perticular 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. . .

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March 1776

What's their relationship?

eve of revolution!

Overview of Coverture and Women's Legal Status

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the American colonies adopted legal customs based on English traditions. According to English Common Law, marriage transformed women's legal status. The principle known as coverture meant that husbands and wives were considered one person in the eyes of the law.

The development of English Common Law, and later the founders of the American republic, were influenced by the ideas of English justice and legal scholar William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765), in which he described the impact of marriage on women's legal status: "By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in the law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs every thing."¹

Upon marriage, an English woman's legal status was "covered" by her husband, who controlled any property or wages. In return, husbands were considered the head of the family and were obligated to provide for their wives. This was thought to be the basis for an orderly and stable society and had a significant influence on colonial America and the new republic created in the aftermath of the American Revolution in 1776.

¹ William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School, accessed August 31, 2022. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/blackstone.asp.

Primary Source Packet

PRIMARY SOURCE A

Advertisements, Newport Mercury, September 1765

Whereas *Elizabeth*, Wife of me the Subscriber, has eloped from my Bed and Board, and it is probable she will contract Debts in my Name :— This is therefore to inform the Publick, that I will not pay one Farthing of any Debt she shall contract from the Date hereof. WILLIAM HEAD.
Little-Compton, Sept. 7. 1765.

Whereas *Barbara*, Wife of me the Subscriber, has contracted Debts without my Consent, and threatens to continue to do the same in such a Manner as her Imprudence and Extravagance may dictate, which will probably deprive me of the Means of Subsistence :— This is therefore to advertise the Publick, That any Debts of her contracting, without my Privity and Consent, from and after the Date hereof, will not be paid by me. JONATHAN HILL.
West-Greenwich, Sept. 4. 1765.

Whereas Elizabeth, wife of me the Subscriber, has eloped from my Bed and Board, and it is probable she will contract Debts in my Name:—This is therefore to inform the Public, that I will not pay one Farthing of any Debt she shall contract from the Date hereof.

William Head.

Little-compton, Sept. 7, 1765.

Whereas Barbara, Wife of me the Subscriber, has contracted Debts without my Consent, and threatens to continue to do the same in such a Manner as her Imprudence and Extravagance may dictate, which will probably deprive me of the Means of Subsistence:—this is therefore to advertise the Publick, That any Debts of her contracting, without my Privity and Consent, from and after the Date hereof, will not be paid by me.

Jonathan Hill.

West-Greenwich, Sept. 4, 1765.

- 1 secretly ran away
- 2 living together as a married couple in the same house
- 3 a unit of English currency
- 4 foolishness or lacking in judgment
- 5 unnecessary expense
- 6 minimum amount of money to support oneself
- 7 legal permission

Primary Source Packet (Con't)

PRIMARY SOURCE A

Advertisements, *Newport Mercury*, September 1765

What do these advertisements reveal about the status or treatment of women during this time period?
What do we learn about Elizabeth and Barbara?

Do these advertisements reinforce coverture or challenge it? Are the women discussed in the advertisements accepting or resisting coverture?

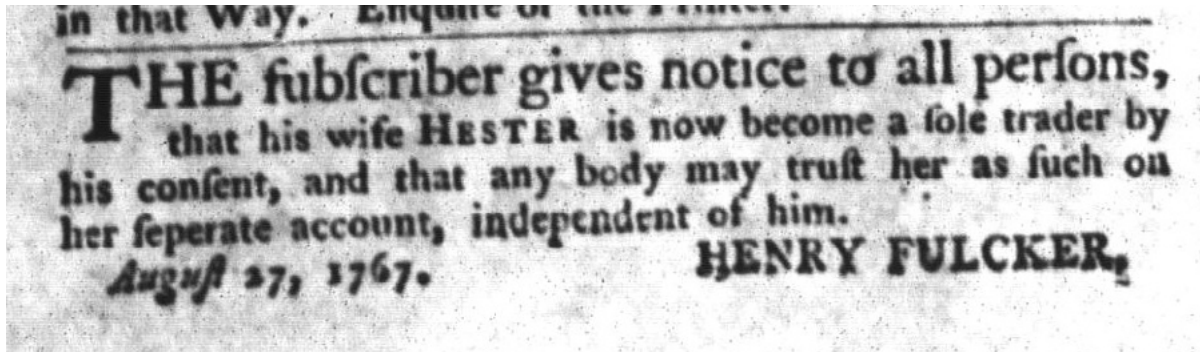
Primary Source Packet (Con't)

PRIMARY SOURCE B

Announcement, Henry Fulcker, *South-Carolina Gazette and Country Journal*, September 15, 1767

American Antiquarian Society

<https://adverts250project.org/2017/09/15/september-15-2/>



Adapted Transcription:

The subscriber gives notice to all persons, that his wife HESTER is now become a sole trader by his consent, and that any body may trust her as such on her separate account, independent of him.

Henry Fulcker

August 27, 1767.

What does this advertisement reveal about the status or treatment of women during this time period?
What do we know about Hester?

Do these advertisements reinforce coverture or challenge it? Is Hester accepting or resisting coverture?

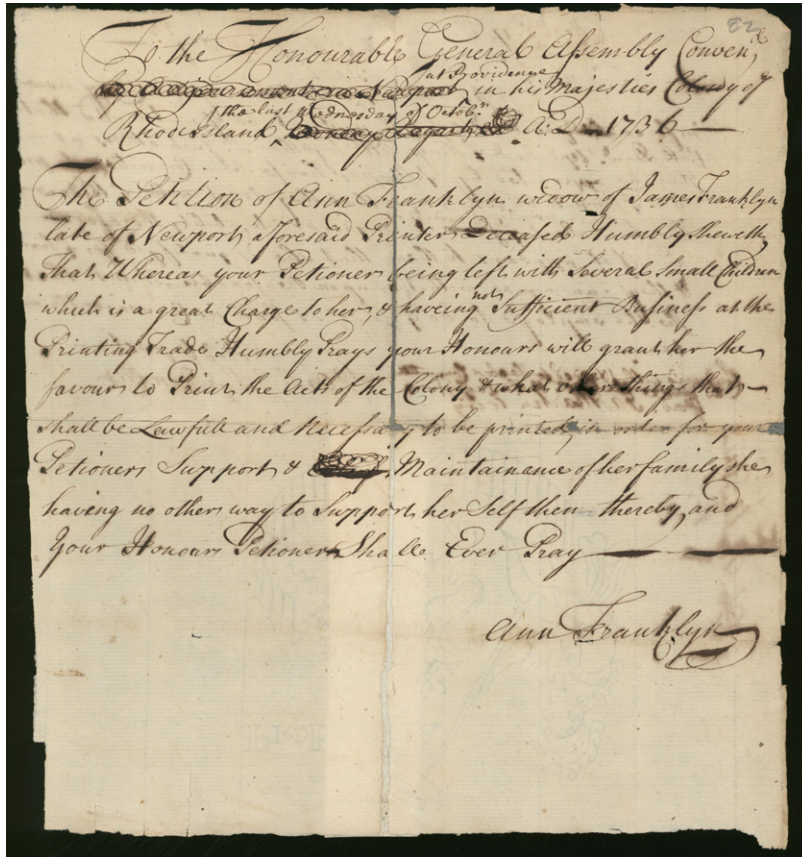
Primary Source Packet (Con't)

PRIMARY SOURCE C

Petition, Ann Franklyn, Petition to the General Assembly, 1736

Rhode Island State Archives

https://sosri.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/IO_1fcd6fba-8d24-463f-bfa4-c2b12256b1c4/



Adapted Transcription:²

To the Honourable General Assembly Convened at Providence in his Majesties Colony of Rhode Island the last Wednesday of October AD 1736 Petition of Ann Franklyn, the widow of James Franklyn late of Newport aforesaid, Printer Deceased, Humbly sheweth whereas your Petitioner being left with Several Small Children which is a great Charge to her, & having not Sufficient Business Printing Trade, Humbly Prays your Honours will grant her favour to Print the Acts of the Colony & what other things that shall be Lawful and Necessary to be printed in order for your Petitioners Support & Maintenance of her family having no other way to Support her Self then thereby, Your Honour Petitioner Shall Ever Pray

Ann Franklyn _____

1 to show

What does this petition reveal about the status or treatment of women during this time period?
What do we know about Ann Franklyn?

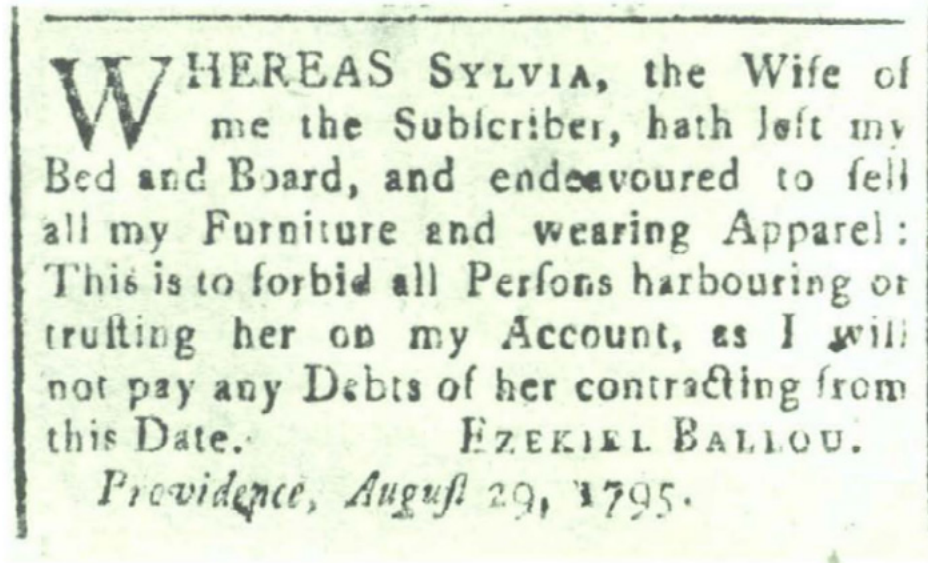
Does this petition reinforce coverture or challenge it? Is Ann Franklyn accepting or resisting coverture?

² This version of the source was provided by the State Department of Rhode Island and adapted from the original version at the Rhode Island State Archives. To learn more, visit <https://docs.sos.ri.gov/documents/civicsandeducation/teacherresources/AnnFranklin.pdf>.

Primary Source Packet (Con't)

PRIMARY SOURCE D

Advertisement, *Providence Gazette*, August 29, 1795
Rhode Island Historical Society



WHEREAS Sylvia, the Wife of me the Subscriber, hath left my Bed and Board,¹ and endeavored² to sell all my Furniture and wearing Apparel:

This is to forbid all Persons harboring³ or trusting her on my Account, as I will not pay any Debts of her contracting from this Date.

Ezekiel Baliou

Providence, August 29, 1795

¹ living together as a married couple in the same house

² trying hard to do or achieve something

³ sheltering or hiding

What does this advertisement reveal about the status or treatment of women during this time period?
What do we know about Sylvia?

Does this advertisement reinforce coverture or challenge it? Is Sylvia accepting or resisting coverture?
