

Feminism and Mainstream Narratives in American History, 1780-2000

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Our co-directed Web site, *Women and Social Movements in U.S. History, 1600-2000*, forges new connections between women's history and the general contours of U.S. history. Visitors to the site (who numbered over 40,000 a month in 2004) can explore many such connections. Since 1997, hundreds of college and high school teachers have drawn on the Web site for documents and interpretations that enliven students' excursions into U.S. history. The site is currently available through institutional subscription, priced on a sliding scale so that secondary schools can afford it. Schools and libraries may sign up for a 30-day trial subscription to evaluate the resource by accessing <<http://www.alexanderstreet6.com/wasm>>. We are in the process of transferring document projects from our Binghamton editorial site to the subscription site, but presently some two dozen projects remain freely available at <<http://womhist.binghamton.edu>>.

Document projects, created by scholars as offshoots of research, comprise the site's central content. In creating such projects, scholars enjoy sharing their favorite documents in their areas of expertise and can display selected topics in greater detail than articles or books permit. The site now offers 57 projects, including some 20,000 pages of documents, more than 600 images, and an extensive section of Teaching Tools with lesson plans and document-based questions. The format for each project is the same. Each focuses on a question and offers between 20 and 50 documents that address the question. Each document has a complete citation as well as a headnote that places it in context. An introduction provides a historical framework for the project as a whole. Each project has a scholarly bibliography, footnotes, and annotations (1).

This array of documents permits readers to explore questions from a variety of perspectives and experience history as it unfolds on a daily basis. Documents encourage readers to draw their own conclusions and develop skills of historical analysis. For example, one project is organized around the question, "How did the Ladies Association of Philadelphia shape new forms of women's activism during the American Revolution?" Another asks, "How did abolitionist women and their slaveholding relatives negotiate their conflict over the issue of slavery?" Another inquires, "How did white women aid former slaves during

and after the Civil War?" Such projects reconfigure mainstream narratives of U.S. history to make women's presence palpable. While the projects are designed to carry students, teachers, and scholars into new questions that pull women's history and U.S. history together, readers can draw on the materials to construct their own historical analysis. This essay models that possibility by selecting a few representative documents from four projects that illuminate the changing relationship between feminism and mainstream aspects of U.S. history.

Defining feminism as "the belief that gender inequalities are socially constructed and can be changed," we browsed through the Web site's document projects to locate examples of documents that illuminate the intersection of feminism and mainstream narratives of U.S. history (2). Because the site focuses on women's collective action in social movements, hundreds of documents fit this description, but we limited our selections to documents from four projects.

First, a pre-feminist group in the 1780s that supported the Continental army during the American Revolution exemplified the limited resources that women's activism could command before feminism became a force in American life (3). Second, the women's rights movement of the 1850s changed American history by adopting the chief rhetorical strategy of American political culture—the political convention (4). Third, the woman suffrage movement illuminates the 1910s debate between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois over the best means for advancing African Americans in American society (5). Finally, the Violence Against Women Act of 1994 and the Supreme Court's review of its civil rights component in 2000 clarifies current debates about the power of the federal government versus the power of the states (6).

Members of the Philadelphia Ladies Association collected money to reward soldiers for staying in the field in 1780. During the previous disastrous winters at Valley Forge and Morristown inadequate supplies led to great suffering and whole companies were abandoning their posts and heading home. Led by Esther Reed, wife of the Governor of Pennsylvania, and Sarah Bache, daughter of Benjamin Franklin, the Ladies Association collected more than \$200,000. The question then arose—in what form should the money be given to the soldiers? In a

fascinating exchange with George Washington, we see that the women lost control of the money they raised. There was a pre-feminist world in which women's power to control social resources was ultimately subject to male authority.

George Washington, commander of the American army, desperately needed shirts for his men and asked that the women turn their money into shirts. "If I am happy in having the concurrence of the Ladies, I would propose the purchasing of course Linnen, to be made into Shirts, with the whole amount of their subscription. A Shirt extraordinary to the Soldier will be of more service, and do more to preserve his health than any other thing that could be procured him." (Document 19) The ladies tried to deflect his request. In this era before the sewing machine, garment-making was a home industry, and they knew that they could turn their money into shirts only by making the garments themselves. Esther Reed urged that "the whole of the money to be changed into hard dollars, and giving each soldier two, to be entirely at his own disposal." (Document 20) When Washington insisted on the shirts, Reed, Bache, and other women patriots turned their households into garment-making factories. Esther Reed died in the process, her obituary noting that she "impos[ed] on herself too great a part of the task" of making shirts (Document 26).

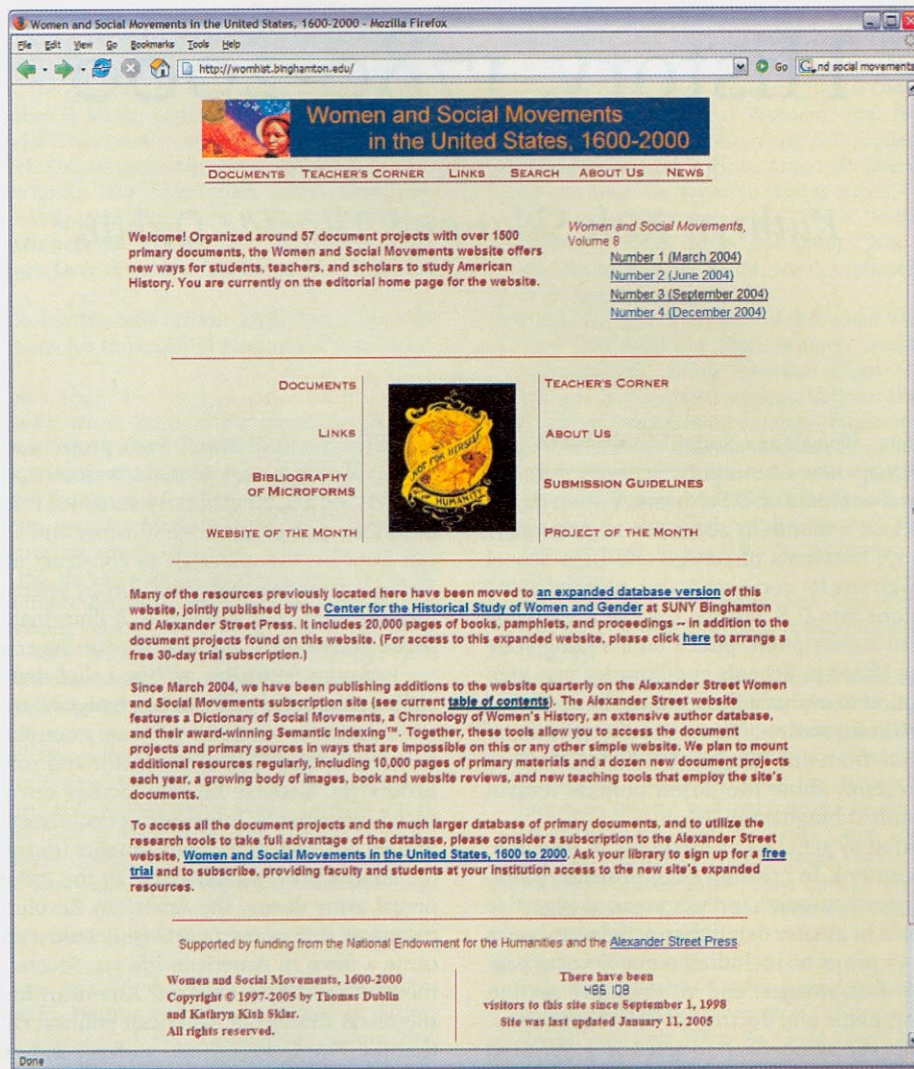
In the 1850s social movements generated various forms of feminism, especially in the antislavery movement. Historians have only begun to analyze the many women's rights conventions that followed the first one held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. (All the extant proceedings of these 1850s and 1860s conventions are available online at the Women and Social Movements Web site.) A speech by reformer Wendell Phillips at the Tenth National Woman's Rights Convention, in New York City in 1860, in a document project on "Male Supporters of Women's Rights," helps us see how those conventions brought feminism into the mainstream of American public life.

Phillips acknowledged the greater authority of women's voices on the subject of women's rights. "One of my friends used to say that she did not believe a man ever could make a decent Woman's Rights speech! (Laughter.) I agree with her entirely. It needs a personal experience; it needs to be on the other side—outside of the law. Our sympathy is not equal to your experience. All we can do is to listen and to obey." (Document 17) Nevertheless, Phillips sought to shape the women's rights movement, arguing that the contemporary debate over divorce should be excluded

from women's rights conventions, saying it was "large enough for a movement of its own." (Document 17) He encouraged women to forge close connections between women's rights conventions and state constitutional conventions. "You will have your State Constitution to change in five or six years. Use such meetings as these, and perhaps the Empire State will earn its title, by inaugurating the great movement becoming Democratic and Saxon Civilization, by throwing open civil life to woman." (Document 17) Phillips's speech shows us how the women's rights convention movement of the 1850s connected women's voices, women's issues, and women's institutions with the mainstream of American political culture.

If we fast forward to the end of the woman suffrage movement in the 1910s, we see how that movement became part of the debate

between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois over how to improve the lives of African Americans. From 1895 until his death in 1915, Washington's power among African Americans was based on his vision of black economic improvement without political rights, the implementation of this vision at Tuskegee Institute, and its ample funding by white philanthropists. Du Bois challenged that vision in 1903 with a civil rights agenda. Both men were slow to incorporate woman suffrage in their agenda, but the power of the movement among African American women made it impossible to ignore. "Personally woman suffrage has never kept me awake at night," Mrs. Margaret Washington wrote in 1895, but she acknowledged that "Thousands of our women vote in the Northern States where they



Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000 web site <<http://womhist.binghamton.edu/>>.

live, and . . . where they are giving the best of themselves in building better homes, better schools, better churches, and finally better citizenship.” (Document 1) Although Du Bois characterized woman suffrage as a white movement in 1907, by 1912 he made it a wedge issue that expanded his support, declaring,

[V]otes for women mean votes for black women. There are in the United States three and a third million adult women of Negro descent. Except in the rural South, these women have larger economic opportunity than their husbands and brothers and are rapidly becoming better educated. . . . We sincerely trust that the entire Negro vote will be cast for woman suffrage in the coming elections in Ohio, Kansas, Wisconsin and Michigan. (Document 12)

Thus a focus on woman suffrage significantly enhances our view of the Washington-Du Bois debate.

More recently, the history of feminism illuminates conflicts in American political culture between the use of federal power and the use of state power. In the 1980s feminist legal scholars spearheaded a movement to expand women’s civil rights by giving women access to federal courts in domestic violence cases. With support from a wide range of women’s groups and bipartisan support for efforts to curtail domestic violence, they successfully promoted the passage of the Violence Against Women Act of 1994 (VAWA). Designed to rectify the inequalities that women encountered in state justice systems, the statute contained a civil rights provision that gave women access to federal courts, establishing for female victims of violence a remedy analogous to civil rights suits for injury motivated by race.

Feminist legal scholar and Yale Law School Professor Judith Resnik has described how the civil rights portion of the act was instituted after systematic studies showed state courts provided inadequate legal protection for women victims of domestic violence. When the case reached the Supreme Court in 1999, it occupied the center of the Court’s continuing debate over defining the boundary between Federal and state authority. One brief supporting the civil rights component of the 1994 statute argued that it was “a proportionate and congruent response to state violations of the Fourteenth Amendment, narrowly crafted to protect federalism interests, and well within Congress’ enforcement powers as defined by this Court’s recent cases.” (Document 18). An opposing brief argued that neither the commerce clause nor the Fourteenth Amendment protected “purely private behavior.” (Document 18B). In 2000 the Court overturned women’s access to federal courts, ruling in *U.S. v. Morrison* that domestic violence was a “local problem” that should be remedied by state courts. Dissenting Justices Souter, Stevens, Ginsburg, and Breyer listed evidence of the catastrophic scale of domestic violence, which had prompted Congress to add the civil rights section to the VAWA in the first place. Professor Resnik later commented,

The history of the relationship between the federal judiciary and the Violence Against Women Act is . . . embedded in a larger history, of the role of the federal courts as a corporate entity, pressed by an energetic leader, making judgments, advising, and lobbying Congress about what rights to accord and about what visions of federalism should govern. (Document 22)

Thus the passage and demise of the civil rights portion of the 1994 Violence Against Women Act mark a significant chapter in women’s history, but also tell a “mainstream” narrative about the relationship between state and federal governments in the U.S. and constraints on the federal government’s ability to protect civil rights.

As these documents drawn from the 1780s, the 1850s, the 1910s and the 1990s illustrate, teaching through documents makes it easy to move from a story that centers women in their own history to one that centers women in the main narratives of U.S. history. In this way we command a larger view of women’s history and an enhanced view of the whole. □

Endnotes

1. Now available through library subscription from Alexander Street Press of Alexandria, Virginia, the Web site continues to grow as an online journal that adds new document projects quarterly, and as a database that adds books, pamphlets and proceedings. We will soon be adding book reviews, Web site reviews, and news from archives. Combined with Alexander Street Press’s Semantic Indexing, a growing authors’ database, and full-text searching, the site is a valuable resource for teaching and research in U.S. women’s history.
2. Linda Gordon, “What’s New in Women’s History,” in Teresa de Lauretis, ed., *Feminist Studies/ Critical Studies* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1986), 29. We apply the term “feminism” to people who did not use the term themselves. Although “feminism” only came into use in the 1890s, we consider it too valuable a term to limit its use to the period after 1890 or to people who self-identified as “feminists.”
3. For a useful secondary account of the Ladies Association, see Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 99-102, and Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), 177-88. The document project we draw upon here is Kathryn Kish Sklar and Gregory Duffy, “How Did the Ladies Association of Philadelphia Shape New Forms of Women’s Activism during the American Revolution, 1780-1781?” in Kathryn Sklar and Thomas Dublin, eds., *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000*, Vol. 5 (2001), at <<http://alexanderstreet6.com/wasm/wasmrestricted/amrev/doclist.htm>>.
4. Gretchen Becht and Kathryn Kish Sklar, “Why Did Some Men Support the Women’s Rights Movement in the 1850s, and How Did Their Ideas Compare to those of Women in the Movement?” in Kathryn Sklar and Thomas Dublin, eds., *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000*, Vol. 3 (1999), at <<http://alexanderstreet6.com/wasm/wasmrestricted/malesupp/doclist.htm>>.
5. Chelsea Kuzma and Kathryn Kish Sklar, “How Did the Views of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois toward Woman Suffrage Change, 1900-1915?” in Kathryn Sklar and Thomas Dublin, eds., *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000*, Vol. 2 (1998), at <<http://www.alexanderstreet6.com/wasm/wasmrestricted/webdbtw/doclist.htm>>.
6. Kathryn Kish Sklar and Suzanne Lustig, “How Have Recent Social Movements Shaped Civil Rights Legislation for Women? The 1994 Violence Against Women Act,” in Kathryn Sklar and Thomas Dublin, eds., *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000*, Vol. 5 (2001), at <<http://alexanderstreet6.com/wasm/wasmopen/vawa/doclist.htm>>.

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