

Educational materials were developed through the Making Master Teachers in Howard County Program, a partnership between Howard County Public School System and the Center for History Education at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

How Did the Public View Women’s Contributions to the Revolutionary War Effort?

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Grade Level: Upper Elementary

Duration: 1-2 Sessions

Overview:

In the Southern colonies, women boycotted more than just tea as they aligned themselves against non-importation policies. Fifty-one female North Carolinians signed the Edenton Ladies’ Tea Party agreement in October 1774. The women declared their “sincere adherence” to the resolves of the provincial Congress, and proclaimed it their “duty” to do “every thing [sic] as far as lies in our power” to support the “publick good.” This action marked a turning point in American women’s involvement in the pre-war effort and perceptions of themselves as political participants. The meeting, however, amused most men, as signified in the satirical drawing of the ladies by the Englishman Arthur Iredell, after reading about it in the newspaper. Thus, this early stirring of political awareness among American women was dismissed as a joke.

A poem, entitled “The Attempt is Praise,” was published in the *Maryland Gazette* on January 5, 1781. Written by an unnamed soldier, the poem does just what the title suggests in praising the work of women during the Revolutionary War. The poet described the women as “mirrors of virtue,” who inspired virtue in men. The mirror analogy was also an indication of how many soldiers felt about women’s wartime contributions. The author further suggested that the war may not have been won if not for their efforts.

By examining this poem and other primary sources, students will gain a deeper understanding of how women’s contributions to the Revolutionary War effort were viewed by the public of their day.

History Standards

Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation (1754 - 1820's)

Standard 2: The impact of the American Revolution on politics, economy, and society.

Historical Thinking Standards:

Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

C. Identify the central questions the historical narrative addresses

D. Differentiate between historical facts and historical interpretations

Objectives:

The student will be able to:

- Describe the viewpoints, roles, and contributions of individuals and groups during the Revolutionary period.
- Identify, interpret, and synthesize information from primary and secondary sources to analyze a social studies question/topic/situation/problem being studied.

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Topic Background

The Sentiments of an American Woman broadside comes from “An American Time Capsule” exhibit at the Library of Congress. This exhibit houses broadsides and other printed ephemera from the seventeenth century to the present. The collection is meant to represent those who contributed to the building of this nation throughout history.

Broadsides and other printed ephemera are often created to meet an immediate need and are not intended to be saved. A broadside is a single sheet of paper that has text printed for a specific purpose on only one side. They are often produced quickly and are distributed for free in large numbers. The purpose of broadsides was to inform, publicize, announce, record, advocate, advertise, or celebrate events.

The Sentiments of an American Woman was printed by John Dunlap on June 10, 1780. Dunlap was a well known printer in Philadelphia who held a printing contract for the Continental Congress. Although *The Sentiments of an American Woman* was only signed, “An American Woman,” historians have attributed Esther Reed as the author. Historians believe Esther hid her identity because anonymity was the convention for women authors during this time. However, there is still no direct link other than the leadership role Esther took in forming the Pennsylvania Ladies Association immediately following the publication of *The Sentiments of an American Woman*. Esther’s intention was to raise the morale of American women to help the Patriot cause. She encouraged women to raise funds for the soldiers. While broadsides were traditionally printed on one side, *The Sentiments of an American Woman* was printed with an addendum document on the reverse side. Rosemary Fry Plakas suggests that the addendum entitled, *Ideas, relative to the manner of forwarding to the American Soldier, the Presents of the American Women*, was drawn up by the secretary to the French legation, Francois, Marquis de Barbe-

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Marbois. However, no other sources seem to suggest that *Ideas* was written by anyone other than Ester Reed.

The *Ideas* called for a “Treasurers” in each county, who would collect money and present it to the wife of the Governor who would be the Treasurers-General of the State. They would, in turn, present the money to Mrs. Washington. General Washington could use the funds in any manner he chose but the women expressed their wish that the funds not be used to supply food, arms, or clothing as these were to be supplied by the army. Their wish was that the money would be an “extraordinary bounty” for the soldiers.

1780 was the sixth year of the Revolutionary War. The soldiers of the Continental Army had just faced another harsh winter without proper supplies, clothing, or nourishment, which led to low morale, desertions, and attempts at mutiny. In the spring of 1780, British General Clinton had attacked and captured Fort Moultrie at Charleston, South Carolina. This marked the worst American defeat of the Revolutionary War as Fort Moultrie held the entire southern American Army. Meanwhile, General Washington faced an attempted mutiny of two Continental regiments in Morristown, New Jersey who demanded their payment of salary that was five months and full rations. While the French had pledged to assist the Americans, their involvement did not show positive effects until July 1780. Joseph Reed had received news of the deteriorating conditions of the army from several sources and Esther Reed was well informed. Esther felt something had to be done to help the soldiers.

Esther DeBerdt Reed was born in England on October 22, 1746. Her father, Dennis DeBerdt Reed was a successful merchant who traded with the colonies. The DeBerdt home was often a meeting place for Americans who had come to England to study business or law. In 1770, she met and married Joseph Reed, an American lawyer and moved to Philadelphia.

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Joseph served as George Washington's secretary and aide-de-camp during the early years of the war and became the elected Governor of Pennsylvania in 1778. Esther regularly wrote to her brother, Dennis DeBerdt in England, and her husband, and openly expressed her political thoughts and ideas. She wrote that she believed America had been wronged by the English parliament and their tax acts.

As the war started, she shared her passion for the American cause as she discussed the strength of public commitment to the cause and her belief in the American's eventual victory. This set her apart from many colonial women during her time that chose not to understand or discuss politics, nor experience it through the men around them. Instead, she used her domestic role to further her own opinions and ideas about the Revolution. The Reeds entertained many important Patriots at their home. While the First Continental Congress met in Philadelphia, the Reeds held several events with its members. One member from Connecticut called Esther a "daughter of liberty." Esther took on *The Sentiments of an American Woman* and the Philadelphia Ladies Association just after giving birth to her sixth child and while recovering from smallpox. While arranging how the money was to be distributed and working to create local committees in other towns, Esther contracted dysentery and died on September 18, 1780. After her death, the Ladies Association of Philadelphia, under the leadership of Sarah Franklin Bache, completed George Washington's request by sewing more than 2,000 shirts for the troops with the money raised.

According to Mary Beth Norton in "The Positive Impact of the American Revolution on White Women," women did not typically engage in formal politics as it was deemed part of the public world or man's arena. Earlier historians of women believed that the Revolution had little effect on the women of the time as it brought them no rights or changes in their everyday lives.

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Norton instead argues that the struggle for independence did impact women. The writings of women during the Revolutionary War demonstrate the shift from writing solely about private affairs, to including descriptions, accounts, observations, and reports of the war. Male Patriot leaders realized they needed women to cooperate in the boycott of tea and other items, thus urging them to actively participate in the boycott and praising those who did. This occasionally led women to break with the tradition of noninvolvement in the public world and formalizing their agreements to boycott items. The female leaders of this campaign and future ones demonstrated they had studied the methods of political mobilization utilized by their husbands. They organized a committee of correspondence, used newspapers for publicity, and tapped interstate social networks.

Realizing that morale was at a perilously low point among the Continental Army, Esther wrote *The Sentiments of an American Woman* as she saw a need for colonial women to contribute to the war effort. She wanted to reward the soldiers for their past services and inspire them for the future. Publication of the broadside marked the beginning of an organized women's movement in Philadelphia. Three days after publication, 36 women met in Philadelphia to show their support. This organization became known as the Ladies Association of Philadelphia and was most active between the years 1780-1871. The immediate plan of action was to conduct a fundraiser to benefit the troops that would involve all the colonies, carried out through the efforts of patriotic women. They kept highly detailed records of the monies collected. By July 4, 1780, the women had collected \$300,000 in paper currency. That July, *The Sentiments of an American Woman* was published in newspapers throughout the colonies and encouraged women in other colonies to organize their own committees.

The document begins by recalling that at the beginning of the Revolutionary War, women

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of America resolved to contribute to the war effort. However, Esther asserts that this effort should be more than offering good wishes for the soldiers. She calls upon scripture, Roman history, and respected heroines throughout history including Joan of Arc, Elizabeth I, and Catherine the Great who had defended their country and urged women to become contemporary heroines. Esther contends that throughout history, women have played a crucial role in revolutions, sometimes dodging weapons of the enemy because they were so close. Yet, in the same sentence she mentions women's "feeble hands" and "their defenders," reasserting women's place in a patriarchal society. Esther states that American women were "born for liberty" and that women would be considered equal to men in their loyalty to the Republic if not for "the weakness of our Constitution, and if opinion and manners did not forbid us..." She asserts that these heroines of the past, our allies, fought the ancestors of these same British soldiers. Esther knew the consequences of such a document in the realm of a patriarchal society, thus she wrote in such a way that women's involvement would seem patriotic rather than scandalous. She states some may not approve, but a true patriot would applaud our efforts. She recalls that at the beginning of the War, ladies had been passionate and boycotted the use of teas, and that it was time again to come together in a manner unique to females. Esther encouraged women to become active within their domestic role. She exhorted the women of Philadelphia to make personal sacrifices such as dressing simpler and wearing their hair less elegantly so that they might raise money to contribute to the troops.

Esther Reed was dedicated to the patriot cause, thus her writings are biased towards those supporting the Continental Army. Specifically, she is targeting her fellow woman Patriots. She compares the woman Patriots to those of the heroines of the past as she calls upon them to dedicate themselves to the cause. Reed claims these heroines were favored by heaven and likens

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them to those that support the Patriot cause. These great women from history have “extended the empire of liberty,” just as the patriots are trying to establish liberty from England. She states it is the Continental Army soldier who we can attribute any tranquility and happiness. Esther tried to include the poor in her campaign, but there is no mention of African American women.

According to Paul Engle, Esther hoped her campaign would unify people from all social classes.

The women who worked on the campaign wrote curricular letters and enclosed the detailed collection plan to other towns to help them organize similar campaigns in their state. This led to similar campaigns in New Jersey, Maryland, and Virginia. The campaign in New Jersey raised \$15,488 for George Washington’s troops. According to Linda Kerber, the female patriots that organized and participated in these campaigns did not actually emerge from the women’s private domain. Additionally, Kerber says that they used their gender to tease or flirt to get contributions. However, Kerber admits that the broadside, *The Sentiments of an American Woman*, which accompanied the campaign, provided an ideological justification for women to enter the political realm. These broadsides became the model henceforward in time. The New Jersey broadside that accompanied their campaign called *The Sentiments of a Lady in New Jersey* echoed similar themes of the original broadside. The New Jersey broadside does not use classical role models, but instead uses contemporary female martyrs such as Miss M’Crea and Mrs. Caldwell.

According to Linda Kerber in “‘History Can Do It No Justice’: Women and the Reinterpretation of the American Revolution”, some loyalists viewed Reed’s broadside and campaign as a form of intimidation because it required confrontation. One loyalist, Anna Rawle noted, “some giving solely against their inclination thro’ fear of what might happen if they refused.” Kerber also criticizes Reed’s wording of her broadside. She explains that Reed

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switches between first and third person throughout the document, which Kerber believes, shows Reed's uncertainty with their political self-concept.

Kerber explains that through Reed's broadside and other political changes at the time, men were beginning to see woman in a new role. Reed's use of the word "the people" was an inclusive term for the changing Revolutionary society. According to Kerber, people were starting to realize that the concept of citizen had to mean more than just taking up arms for one's country; allegiance should also be part of the equation. Women could demonstrate their allegiance by joining the political community. Despite this change, Kerber notes that citizenship was still gendered on the basis of how one could demonstrate their citizenship, either through military service or political involvement. Kerber claims that while an image of female patriotism did emerge from the war, women and men handled this concept in different ways. As George Washington described female patriotism, he says it was passive, admiring, and quietly suffering; it was, he wrote to Anne Francis and other Philadelphia contributors, "the love of country...blended with those softer domestic virtues." (106) Kerber states that the classical allusions used in Reed's broadside were used to legitimize women's strength in the face of disaster. It played upon the male sentiments of female patriotism such as sacrifice, but it brought politics into the domestic realm and made it relevant to everyday life. The broadside asserted that the political woman who solicited contributions for the soldiers and took responsibility for others such as widows and orphans, too, was more of a patriot than women who chose to attend only to domestic tasks.

In "Liberty's Daughters," Mary Beth Norton also addresses the different depictions of how contributions were given. She includes Anne Rawle's account of the campaign that Kerber also referred to, but also includes an anonymous letter that described how women proudly and

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voluntarily gave to the cause. Norton determines that it is impossible to know which woman's account is accurate, but regardless, the amount of money the campaign raised made it a success. Norton also gives additional background information about the British occupation from 1777-1778. She notes that some Philadelphia women had kept the company of the enemy troops during this time. Norton asserts this is why the anonymous author says the campaign will allow, "some of our female fellow citizens and opportunity of relinquishing former errors and of avowing a change of sentiments by their contributions to the general cause of liberty and their country." Norton also examines other writings that referred to *The Sentiments of An American Woman* during the Revolutionary period. In the June 27 *Pennsylvania Packet*, an essay entitled "Song of Debra" asserted that the attentiveness of America's women to their soldiers must be a blow to our enemy and that "the women will reinspire the war; and ensure, finally, victory and peace." (182) Norton theorizes that it is not so much the monetary contributions of the women that inspired the soldiers; rather, it was seen as a sign of respect to the army as many of the soldiers felt neglected and forgotten by the citizens at this point in the war.

Unlike Kerber, Norton asserts that although women set out with a traditionally unfeminine purpose in mind, they ended up back in a domestic role sewing shirts for the army. L.H. Butterfield actually refers to these women as "General Washington's Sewing Circle" in a 1951 article in *American Heritage*. This condescension was also seen by Revolutionary leaders, Benjamin Rush and John Adams as they stated, "the Ladies having undertaken to support American Independence, settles the point." (187). Women, however, were genuinely proud of their accomplishments and sense of involvement. Abigail Adams wrote, "virtue exists, and publick sprit lives- lives in the Bosoms of the Fair Daughter of America, who blushing for the Languid Spirit, and halting Step, unite their Efforts to reward the patriotick, to stimulate the

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Brave, to alleviate the burden of War, and to shew that they are not dismayed by defeats or misfortunes.” (188)

Historians have used *The Sentiments of An American Woman* to discuss female patriotism. However, minorities are not represented, both in the sense of racial and social-economic status. It seems more research surrounding the events of this broadside could provide more insight into the contributions of various minority groups, especially African Americans and women of lower social classes. Paul Engle alludes to the fact that Reed had hoped to unify people from all social classes with her campaign, however there is no follow up to this statement with actual results. Historians could examine if there is any evidence to support the idea that *The Sentiments of An American Woman* did indeed unite these minority groups.

Works Cited

Engle, Paul. Women in the American Revolution. Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1976.

Gundersen, Joan R. To Be Useful to the World: Women in Revolutionary America, 1740-1790. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

Kerber, Linda K. “History Can Do It No Justice: Women and the Reinterpretation of the American Revolution.” *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*. Ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert. Charlottesville: United States Capitol Historical Society by the University Press of Virginia, 1989.

Kerber, Linda K. Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980.

Norton, Mary Beth. Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980.

Norton, Mary Beth. “The Positive Impact of the American Revolution on White Women.” *Major Problems in American Women’s History*. Ed. Ruth M. Alexander and Mary Beth Norton. 4th ed. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007.

The Sentiments of an American Woman. Philadelphia 1780. Printed Ephemera Collection; Portfolio 146, Folder 3. Imprint 3.; Evans 16992.

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Vocabulary:

Sentiment - an attitude, thought, or judgment prompted by feeling

Disposition- the tendency of something to act in a certain manner under given circumstances

Manifested - to make evident or certain by showing or displaying

Vain - having or showing undue or excessive pride in one's appearance or achievements

Teaching Procedures

Materials Needed:

- Student Packets printed back to back and stapled (1 per student)
 - “The Sentiments of an American Woman” (Resource Sheet #01)
 - “Ideas, Relative to the Manner of Forwarding to the American Soldiers, the Presents of the American Women” (Resource Sheet #02)
 - “The Attempt is Praise” (Resource Sheet #03)
 - “Written Document Analysis Worksheet” (Resource Sheet #04), 2 per student
- “A Society of Patriotic Ladies, at Edenton in North Carolina” (Resource Sheet #05), 1 per student
- “Cartoon Analysis Worksheet” (Resource Sheet #06), 1 per student
- “Social Studies Research Report” (Resource Sheet #07), 1 per student
- “Revolutionary Rubric” (Resource Sheet #08), 1 per student

Instructional Strategies Utilized:

- *Response Groups*- Students work in pairs to discuss critical-thinking questions about each of documents
- *Historical Investigation* – Student pairs interpret primary and secondary sources to formulate theories about the role of women in the Revolutionary War
- *Reading Informational Text*-students will utilize a graphic organizer to help them organize and analyze the text
- *Writing for Understanding*-students will use a Fast-Write to show what they already know about the topic before reading and to demonstrate additional information they have learned after reading
- *Writing for Understanding*-students will use a Social Studies Research Report as a prewriting planner to organize their persuasive essay.

Day One

Motivation:

Tell students the focus of this lesson is the way the public saw the role of women in the Revolutionary War. In their journals, have students free-write for five minutes what they know about this topic. Have students share their responses. Students may discuss that some women served as soldiers, some boycotted tea, and some participated in spinning bees, or they may have very limited background knowledge. Explain that students will be reading about a different way that women participated in the Revolutionary War and then looking at some ways that men responded to women’s participation in the war effort.

Procedure:

- 1. Explain that students will work in pairs to analyze and interpret documents about the role of women in the Revolutionary War. Tell students that they become historians by carefully analyzing sources from the past using the questions posed on the document analysis worksheet.**
- 2. Distribute documents (Resource Sheets #01, #02, #03) and four copies of the “Written Document Analysis Worksheet” (Resource Sheet #04) to student pairs (2 per student).**
- 3. Model analyzing the documents using a think-aloud to complete the “Written Document Analysis Worksheet” (Resource Sheet #04) with “The Sentiments of an American Woman” (Resource Sheet #01) with the class. During and after reading, periodically stop to summarize the main points of each section.**
- 4. (*Reading Informational Text*) Have student pairs read and analyze the remaining documents, recording their information on their “Written Document Analysis Worksheet” (Resource Sheet #04). Remind students to periodically pause and summarize what they have read.**
- 5. Review students’ findings. Have students share out their findings for each document. Facilitate a lively class discussion on the following questions:**
 - What did the “Sentiments of an American Woman” propose women do to help the war effort?
 - Who was the intended audience? How can you tell?
 - What does the remembrance from a citizen of Boston tell you about the role of women in the war effort?
 - What does the soldier’s poem tell you about the soldier’s response to women helping with the war effort?
 - Why do you think people would have reacted differently?

De-brief:

Have students synthesize information they have learned by analyzing a political cartoon. Teacher will facilitate the discussion by using “A Society of Patriotic Ladies, at Edenton in North Carolina” (Resource Sheet #05) and have students complete the “Cartoon Analysis Worksheet” (Resource Sheet #06). The teacher will review students’ findings and ask, “What does the political cartoon tell you about the creator’s view of women?”

Day Two

Motivation:

Review the documents students looked at during the previous class. Have students discuss the following questions.

- Which documents were most helpful? What made them helpful?
- Which documents were least helpful? What made them less helpful?

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Procedure:

1. **Explain that students will be writing a three-paragraph essay to answer the question, “How did the public view women’s contributions to the Revolutionary War effort?”**
2. **Distribute the “Social Studies Research Report” (Resource Sheet #07) to use as a pre-writing planner to help students organize their essay.** Review the format and model completion of the organizer. Allow time for students to complete the organizer. Tell students their three supporting ideas must be based on facts they learned from the sources they studied.
3. (Writing for Understanding) **Allow time for students to write a three-paragraph essay that answers the question, “How did the public view women’s contributions to the Revolutionary War effort?”**
Students must take an affirmative or negative stance on the essay question and provide three supporting persuasive points using the primary and secondary sources they examined to explain their argument. This assignment may be continued as homework or on subsequent days, as needed.

De-brief:

Have students split into two teams: Those who believed women helped the Revolutionary War Effort and those who do not believe women helped the Revolutionary War Effort. Hold a mini debate between the two sides allowing students to share the arguments they used in their essays.

Thoughtful Application:

Have students write a reflective journal entry that poses the question, “What might have happened if women did not help the Revolutionary War Effort?” Encourage students to use information from their sources to support their answers.

Evaluation:

- Observe participation in large and small group settings.
- Assess completion of document analysis worksheets.
- Evaluate the thoughtful application essay using the “Revolutionary Rubric” (Resource Sheet #08).
- Observe and record student responses.

Extension:

- Have students research individual women who helped the Revolutionary War effort and create a living statue based off their individual.

Primary Source Annotations

Reed, Esther. *The Sentiments of an American Woman*. Broadside. Philadelphia, 1780. From Library of Congress, *An American Time Capsule: Three Centuries of Broadsides and Other Printed Ephemera*. <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi->

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<bin/query/h?ammem/rbpebib:@field%28NUMBER+@band%28rbpe+14600300%29%29>
(accessed January 10, 2011).

In this broadside, believed to have been written by Esther Reed, the intention was to raise the morale of American women to help the Patriotic cause. She encouraged women to raise funds for the soldiers. While broadsides are traditionally printed on one side only, *The Sentiments of an American Woman* is printed with an addendum document on the reverse side. This addendum entitled, *Ideas, relative to the manner of forwarding to the American Soldier, the Presents of the American Women*, called for a “Treasurer” in each county who would collect money and present it to General Washington. The women expressed their wish that the funds not be used to supply food, arms, or clothing as these were to be supplied by the army. Their wish was that the money would be an “extraordinary bounty” for the soldiers. Students will analyze this document to determine the role of women in the Revolutionary War.

The Maryland Gazette. “The Attempt is Praise.” January 5, 1781. From Maryland State Archives, Maryland Gazette Collection, 1779-1787.

<http://www.msa.md.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc4800/sc4872/001283/html/m1283-0220.html>
(accessed January 10, 2011).

“The Attempt is Praise” is a poem that was written by an anonymous soldier. The poem does just what the title suggests, to flatter the work done by women during the war. The poet described the women as “mirrors of virtue,” who inspired virtue in men. The author points out that the women that helped were of great assets, and the rest of his text asserts that the war would not be won if it had not been for their efforts. Students will analyze this document to determine the response of a soldier to women helping with the Revolutionary War effort.

Dawes, Philip. *A Society of Patriotic Ladies, at Edenton in North Carolina. Cartoon.* London: Robert Sayer and John Bennett, March 25, 1775. From Library of Congress, *British Cartoon Print Collection*. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsca.19468> (accessed January 10, 2011).

In the South, groups of women boycotted more than just tea as they aligned themselves against non-importation policies. Fifty-one female North Carolinians signed the Edenton Ladies’ Tea Party agreement in October 1774. American women had never before taken on the responsibility of a public role. This marked a turning point in American women’s political perceptions in which they would eventually see themselves as participants. The meeting, however, amused most men. This led to the satirical drawing of the ladies by the Englishman Arthur Iredell after he read about it in the newspaper. Students will analyze this document to determine the view that some men had towards women’s involvement in the war effort.