Women in the 19th Century: Crash Course US History #16

Crash Course: U.S. History
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Hi, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course U.S. History, and today we're going to talk about wonder women.

Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Finally, we get to the history of the United States as seen through the lens of Marvel comic superheroes.

Oh, Me from the Past, you sniveling little idiot, Wonder Woman is from the DC universe!

Also, this is the study of history, which means a constant reexamination and redefinition of what it means to be a hero, and in the case of this episode, it's about taking the first steps toward acknowledging that not all heroes worthy of historical recognition are men.

So, we're going to talk about how women transformed pre-Civil War America as they fought to improve prisons, schools, decreased public drunkenness, and end slavery. And while fighting for change and justice for others, American women discovered that the prisoners, children, and slaves they were fighting for weren't the only people being oppressed and marginalized in the American democracy.

(Intro)

So, in the Colonial Era, most American women of European descent lived lives much like those of their European counterparts; they were legally and socially subservient to men and trapped within a patriarchal structure. Lower- and working-class women were actually more equal to men of their own classes, but only because they were, like, equally poor. As usual, it all comes back to economics. In general, throughout world history, the higher the social class, the greater the restrictions on women. Although, high-class women have traditionally had the lowest mortality rates, which is one of the benefits of, you know, doors, and extra life boats and whatnot. So, at least you get to enjoy that oppression for many years.

As previously noted, American women did participate in the American Revolution, but they were still expected to marry and have kids, rather than, like, pursue a career. Under the legal principle of coverture, actually, husbands held authority over the person, property, and choices of their wives.

Also, since women weren't permitted to own property, and property ownership was a precondition for voting, they were totally shut out of the political process. Citizens of the new republic were, therefore, definitionally male, but women still did improve their status via the ideology of Republican motherhood.

Women were important to the new republic, because they were raising children, especially male children, who would become the future voters, legislators, and honorary doctors of America.

So, women couldn't themselves participate in the political process, but they needed to be educated some, because they were going to potty train those who would later participate in the political process. What's that, there were no potties? Really?! Apparently, instead of potties, they had Typhoid. Actually, it was a result of not having potties.

So, even living without rights and a potiless nation, the Republican mother idea allowed women access to education, so that they could teach their children. Also, women--provided they weren't slaves--were counted in determining the population of a state, for representation purposes. So, that was at least an acknowledgment that they were, like, five fifths human.

And then the Market Revolution had profound effects on American women, too, because as production shifted from homes to factories, it shifted away from women doing the producing. This led to the so-called "cult of domesticity," which, like most cults, I am opposed to. That's right, Stan, I'm opposed to the Blue Öyster Cult, The Cult, The Cult of Personality by In Living Color, and the three remaining Shakers. Sorry, Shakers. But, who are we kidding? You're not watching. You're too busy dancin'!

The cult of domesticity decreed that a woman's place was in the home, so rather than making stuff, the job of women was to enable their husbands to make stuff by providing food and a clean living space, but also by providing what our favorite historian Eric Foner called "non-market values like love, friendship, and mutual obligation," which is the way we talk about puppies these days. And, indeed, that's in line with actual story titles from nineteenth-century American women's magazines, like "Woman, a Being to Come Home To," and "Woman: Man's Best Friend."

Oh, it's time for the Mystery Document? I hope it's from woman, man's best friend!

[Mystery Document]

The rules here are simple. I either get the author of the Mystery Document right--oh hey there, eagle--or I get shocked. Let's see what we got.

"Woman is to win everything by peace and love; by making herself so much respected, esteemed and loved, that to yield to her opinions and to gratify her wishes, will be the free-will offering of the heart. ... But the moment woman begins to feel the promptings of ambition, or the thirst for power, her aegis of defense is gone. All the sacred protection of religion, all the generous promptings of chivalry, all the poetry of romantic gallantry, depend upon a woman's retaining her place as dependent and defenseless, and making no claims, and maintaining no right but what are the gifts of honor, rectitude and love."

Well, it was definitely a dude, and I have no idea which dude, so I'm just going to guess John C. Calhoun, because he's a bad person. No? Well, what can you do? It wasn't a dude?! It was apparently Harriet Beecher Stowe's sister Catharine, who was an education reformer, and yet held all of those opinions, so ahhhAAHHHHHHH!

[End of Mystery Document]

So, I assume Stan brought up Harriet Beecher Stowe's sister to point out that it wasn't just men who bought into the cult of domesticity. The idea of true equality between men and women was so radical that almost no one embraced it. Like, despite the economic growth associated with the market economy, women's opportunities for work were very limited. Only very low-paying work was available to them, and in most states, they couldn't control their own wages if they were married. But still, poor women did find work in factories or as domestic servants or seamstresses. Some middle-class women found work in that most disreputable of fields, teaching, but the cult of domesticity held that a respectable middle-class woman should stay at home.

The truth is, most American women had no chance to work for profit outside their houses, so many women found work outside traditional spheres in reform movements. Okay, let's go to the thought bubble.

[Thought Bubble]

Reform movements were open to women party because if women were supposed to be the moral center of the home, they could also claim to be the moral conscience of the nation. Thus, it didn't seem out of the ordinary for women to become active in the movement to

build asylums for the mentally ill, for instance, as Dorothea Dix was, or to take the lead in sobering the men of America.

Many of the most famous advocates for legally prohibiting the sale of alcohol in the U.S. were women. Like, Carry Nation attacked bars with a hatchet--and not because she'd had a few too many. The somewhat less radical Frances Willard founded the Women's Christian Temperance Union in 1874, which would be one of the most powerful lobbying groups in the United States by the end of the 19th century.

And women gave many temperance lectures, featuring horror stories of men who--rather than seeking refuge from the harsh competition of the market economy in the loving embrace in their homes--found solace at the bottom of a glass or at the end of a beer hose. And by the way, yes, there were bars that allowed you to drink as much beer as you could from a hose for a nickel. Today, these establishments are known as frat houses.

These temperance lectures would tell of men spending all of their hard-earned money on drink, leaving wives and children--there were always children--starving and freezing, because in the world of the temperance lecture, it was always winter.

Now, don't get me wrong. Prohibition was a disaster, because 1) freedom, and 2) it's the only time we had to amend the Constitution to be like, "just kidding about that other amendment". But, it's worth remembering that back then, people drank way more than we do now, and also that alcohol is probably a greater public health issue than some recreational drugs that remain illegal. But regardless, the temperance movement made a huge difference in American life, because eventually, male and female supporters of temperance realized that women would be a more powerful ally against alcohol if they could vote.

[End of Thought Bubble]

Thanks, Thought Bubble. So, in 1928, critic Gilbert Seldes wrote that if prohibition had existed in 1800, the suffragists might have remained for another century a scattered group of intellectual cranks. And to quote another historian, the most urgent for women to want to vote in the mid-1800s were alcohol-related: they wanted the saloons closed down or at least regulated, they wanted the right to own property and to shield their family's financial security of the profligacy of drunken husbands, they wanted the right to divorce those men and have them arrested for wife-beating, and to protect children from being terrorized by them. To do all these things, they needed to change the laws that consigned married women to the status of chattel, and to change those laws, they needed the vote.

Many women were also important contributors to the anti-slavery movement, although they tended to have more subordinate roles, like abolitionist Maria Stewart was the first African American to lecture to mixed male and female audiences. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote the terrible but very important Uncle Tom's Cabin. Sarah and Angela Grimké, daughters of the South Carolina slaveholder, converted to Quakerism and became outspoken critics of slavery.
Sarah Grimké even published the Letters on the Equality of the Sexes in 1838, which is pretty much what the title suggests.

By the way, Stan, you could've made Sarah Grimké's Letters the Mystery Document. I would've gotten that.

But I wanna say one more thing about Harriet Beecher Stowe. There's a reason we read Uncle Tom's Cabin in history classes and not in literature ones. But Uncle Tom's Cabin introduced millions of Americans to the idea that African American people were people. At least to 19th-century readers, Uncle Tom's Cabin humanized slaves to such a degree that it was banned throughout most of the South.

So, many women involved in the abolitionist movement, when studying slavery, noticed that there was something a little bit familiar. Now, some male abolitionists, notably Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison, became supporters of women's rights, but ultimately the male leaders of the anti-slavery movement denied women's demands for equality, believing that any calls for women's rights would undermine the cause of abolition.

And they may have had a point, because slavery only existed in parts of the country, whereas women existed in all of it. In fact, one of the arguments used by pro-slavery forces is that equality under the law for male slaves might lead to a slippery slope ending with, like, equality for women. And out of this emerging consciousness of their own subordinate position, the movement for women's rights was born.

The most visible manifestation of it was the issue of women's suffrage, raised most eloquently at the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, where Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and many others wrote and published the Declaration of Sentiments, modeled very closely on the Declaration of Independence. Except in some ways, this Declaration was much more radical than the Declaration of Independence, because it took on the entire patriarchal structure.

Okay, so there are three things I want to quickly point out about the 19th-century movement for women's rights.

First, like abolitionism, it was an international movement. Often, American feminists traveled abroad to find allies, prefiguring the later transatlantic movement of other advocates for social justice, like Florence Kelley and W. E. B. Du Bois.

Secondly, for the most part, like other reform movements, the women's movement was primarily a middle-class or even upper-class effort. Most of the delegates at Seneca Falls, for instance, were from the middle class. There were no representatives of, like, cotton mills, but this didn't mean that 19th-century feminists didn't acknowledge the needs of working women. Like Sojourner Truth, probably the most famous black woman abolitionist, spoke eloquently of the plight of working-class women, especially slaves, since she'd been one until 1827. And other women recognized that women needed to be able to participate in the market economy to gain some economic freedom. Now, of course, all the women who wrote about the moral evils of 19th-century America or spoke out or took hatchets to saloons were doing what we would now recognize as work. But they were not being paid.
Amelia Bloomer god paid, though, because she recognized that it was impossible for women to easily participate in economic activities because of their crazy clothes. So, she popularized a new kind of clothing, featuring a loose-fitting tunic, trousers, and eponymous undergarments. But then bloomer and her pants were ridiculed in the press and in the streets, and this brings up the third important thing to remember about the 19th-century women's movement.

It faced strong resistance. Patriarchy, like the force, is strong, which is why Luke and Yoda and Darth Vader and Obi-Wan and whoever Samuel Jackson pla--all dudes. By the way, why did they train Luke up and not Princess Leia, who was cooler and had more to fight for and was less screwed up? Patriarchy. Many women's rights advocates were fighting to overturn not just laws, but also attitudes. Some of those goals--such as claiming greater control over the right to regulate their own sexual activity and whether or not to have children--were twisted by critics, claiming that women advocated free love. It's interesting to note that the United States ended

slavery more than 50 years before it granted women the right to vote, and that although much of the march toward equality between the sexes has been slow and steady, the equal rights amendment, despite being passed by Congress, was never ratified.

But by taking leading roles in the reform movements of the 19th century, not just when it came to temperance and slavery, but also prisons and asylums, women were able to enter the public sphere for the first time, and these great women changed the world, for better and for worse, just as great men do. And along the way, they made the women question part of the movement for social reform in the United States, and in doing so, American women chipped away at the idea that a woman's place must be in the home.

That might not have been a presidential election or a war, but it is still bringing real change to our real lives on a daily basis. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Meredith Danko. The associate producer is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself. And our graphics team is Thought Café.

If you want to suggest captions for the Libertage, please do so in comments, where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians.

Thanks for watching Crash Course, and as we say in my home town, don't forget to be awesome.