

Revere House Radio

Season 1 Episode 19

Advocacy and Activism Through the Written Word

Welcome to Revere house Radio, I'm your host, Adrienne Turnbull-Reilly. What is the one thing that always, without fail, makes historians excited? Well, primary source documents, of course! It always thrills me to go exploring and read letters written by someone who lived centuries ago. They're one of the best ways we can gain access to the experiences of those in the past, through their own words. Today, we are inundated with text based communications through our publications, text messages, tweets, websites, and much much more. However, the written word was a little more sparse in the 18th and 19th centuries. As I began thinking about this episode, I was wondering about early Boston and what types of advocacy through text Paul Revere and his family may have encountered. What can we learn from the texts that still do have from the late 18th and early 19th century? What were some examples of people using their words for positive change?

In light of these questions, I came across an interesting source that was published in the Massachusetts Magazine, or, if you prefer a longer title, "Monthly museum of knowledge and rational entertainment". Published from 1789 to 1796 by Isaiah Thomas, we know that Paul Revere subscribed to the magazine in 1795 and we even have a copy of one volume in our collections that dates to 1791.

Special among the publications in that magazine was one written by Judith Sargeant Murray. Murray was a Massachusetts born writer and thinker, and wrote under pseudonyms that included "Honora," "Martesia," "Constantia", and "The Gleaner." The document that piqued my interest was published in 1790 under the name Constantia, and is titled "On the Equality of the Sexes." This essay advocates for the further education of girls and women on the grounds that - unlike what many at the time argued - women weren't actually intellectually inferior, they were just systematically excluded from education, and therefore ignorant. Women's minds were just as curious, just as eager to learn as men, but since they weren't given the same educational opportunities as men, they *appeared* to be less interested in higher thought. She even makes quite an amusing argument that women's ability for higher thought and imagination is exemplified in their ability to spin gossip about their friends and foes! Of course I wanted to know, did Paul Revere read this essay? Did Rachel Revere? What did they think about it? We have no way of knowing, since the only concrete evidence we have of Revere's interest in this particular magazine dates to 1795. I think it is likely he at least heard of it, if not read it himself, since he tended to be heavily involved in print media - he engraved dozens of images for the Royal American magazine and the masthead for the Massachusetts Spy - he was generally a man in the know through his professional and social connections. I cannot speculate further about Revere's reaction to such an inflammatory - at the time - statement that women should have equal access

to education as men. What I can point to though is another document that shows some advocacy on Revere's part on behalf of a fellow soldier from the revolution, Robert Shurtliff.

Some of you may recognize that name and its bearer as Deborah Sampson, a Massachusetts born woman who disguised herself as Robert Shurtliff and enlisted in the Continental Army 1782. After nearly dying of a fever and being found out as a woman during her medical treatment, she was discharged in 1783. Life as a veteran was difficult for Deborah - she went on to marry and bore children, but her family were poor farmers and she hoped a military pension would help alleviate some of their hardship. Her pursuit of a pension was very long, starting as early as 1790 and not successful until 1805. In 1804, Paul Revere wrote a letter to Massachusetts Congressman William Eustis advocating for Deborah Gannett, using her married name, to receive her due pension. He writes to Eustis "Humanity, & Justice, obliges me to say, that every person with whom I have conversed about Her, and it is not a few, speak of Her as a woman of handsome talents, good Morals, a dutifull Wife and an affectionate parent"...then he signs off by saying "I have no doubt your humanity will prompt you to do all in Your power to get her some relief, I think her case much more deserving than hundreds to whom Congress have been generous." The letter is really interesting because though it ultimately is kind-hearted, Revere has no shortage of misguided assumptions for what a woman soldier would be like when he met her. He writes, "We commonly form our Idea of the person whom we hear spoken off, whom we have never seen; according as their actions are described, when I heard her spoken off as a Soldier, I formed the Idea of a tall, Masculine female, who had a small share of understandg, without education, & one of the meanest of her Sex" I'm sure Judith Sargent Murray would have something things to say about these preconceptions! Revere admits he was wrong about Sampson by writing "When I saw and discoursed with I was agreeably surpris'd to find a small, effeminate, and converseable Woman, whose education entitl'd her to a better situation in life." Apparently they developed such a rapport that in a letter dated February 22, 1806, Sampson asks for ten dollars from Revere to cover some lapse while she and one of her sons were quite sick. She promises to repay him the next time she comes to Boston, but writes "that after receiving ninety and nine good turns as it were- my circumstances require I should ask the hundredth."

Again, I cannot speculate as to Revere's views on gender equality or women's education. We cannot even know if Revere read Murray's words. I can't help but wonder though, after reading and comparing these two documents, how Revere and Murray would have gotten along. Written by people who lived very close to each other in both time and place but who, by virtue of their culture, experienced the world very differently. Some could argue that Murray was better educated than Revere in subjects such as philosophy and literature, but by being a woman was forced to operate in a world molded around white men's power. Deborah Sampson, perhaps not viewing herself as an activist but simply searching for what other people in her position could expect to receive, turned to someone of local importance for help, and received it.

So, I challenge our listeners out there - can you use your words for positive change? Is there a person or a cause who could benefit from your voice of support? Reading these documents from so long ago shows us that words have always had power: to advocate, to agitate, to strive toward a better, more equitable future.

Thank you for listening to this episode of Revere House Radio. If you'd like to learn more about Judith Sargent Murray, I encourage you to visit the Sargent House Museum in Gloucester, Massachusetts. They are doing virtual programming right now, but when it is safe to do so you can tour her house. Please check out our own activities from the Paul Revere House via our website, Facebook, and Twitter. Our September lecture series is right around the corner! Starting on Tuesday, September 15, we will have lectures live streamed to Youtube and also on our Facebook page. This year's lecture series is structured around the theme of climate change through the centuries. Tuesday's speaker Anya Zilberstein will be presenting her talk "Global Warming and Global Cooling in Early Boston." Hope to see you there!