"PORTS, PETTICOATS, AND POWER?" WOMEN AND WORK IN EARLY-NATIONAL PHILADELPHIA

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On a Saturday in March 1785, Jane Bullion received five lashes of the whip at the public whipping post in Philadelphia. She had stolen 4lb. of thread from James Rowan, a shopkeeper on Second Street. Not only was she to be whipped, but she had to return the goods or pay their value of £1 15s, and pay a fine and the costs of prosecution.¹ Not many of the women convicted of crimes in the same quarter session were whipped, so perhaps Jane was a repeat offender. In this regard she is not representative. However, the nature of the goods stolen indicates a mundane reality. Jane may have used the thread in order to complete work as a seamstress. In that regard she does represent the many poor women struggling to survive in Philadelphia after the American War of Independence. Of course, not all women resorted to theft, but Jane’s plight highlights the many difficulties that women faced in finding work in Philadelphia in the early national period. Political independence did not mean economic dependence from Britain and these women had to work within an economy which was experiencing slow but important structural changes. Furthermore, women still labored under feme covert (in which a married woman’s legal identity was subsumed under that of her husband), low wages, and socio-cultural ideas of gender. However, whether through choice or necessity, women were able to take advantage of the very socio-cultural norms which threatened to constrain them within an environment in which many husbands were absent at sea, and yet more men were transient visitors. Women therefore made a significant, if unquantifiable, contribution to the port’s economy during this important period.

Early-National Philadelphia and the Context for Women and Work

In 1783, Philadelphia was the leading port of the newly created United States and a major entrepôt for goods around the Atlantic littoral. The city’s merchants exported flour, bread, and iron, imported and re-exported manufactured goods from Britain, and acted as distributors for goods from along the eastern seaboard, including tobacco, rice, and, despite restrictions, West Indian sugar. When the newly-created Bank of North America opened its doors in 1781, Philadelphia was also well on the way to becoming a financial center. Its importance is further demonstrated by the fact that between 1790 and 1800 Philadelphia was the capital of the new nation.

Independence freed Philadelphia from the mercantilist restrictions it had been under as part of the formal British Empire, but it did not mean that the city was free economically. It took time for Philadelphia’s economy to become independent, and until at least the early nineteenth century Philadelphia was still part of the informal British empire. Philadelphians needed to learn or import the skills necessary for large-scale manufacturing to replace some of the goods they had previously purchased from Britain. Yet by 1812 home manufactures were still not considered a large enough part of the export economy. For many years, then, Philadelphia’s economy retained the structure of a colonial port which, as we shall see, meant a lack of opportunities for women. However, slowly, the economy grew in size and complexity. Imports from the US to Great Britain rose

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