

## Founding Mothers By Cokie Roberts

Founding Mothers is a contemporary look at the “women behind the man” men who led this country through a Revolution and into a new developed country. The author, Cokie Roberts is a highly acclaimed author and political analyst. She, along with her husband have written two other books which delve into the lives of our founding fathers and their spouses, *From This Day Forward* and *We Are Our Mothers’ Daughters*. This book offers a glimpse into the struggles and successes of the often untouted efforts of the “gentler sex” on behalf of a struggling nation. The front sleeve of the books says,

“While much has been written about the men who signed the Declaration of Independence, battled the British and framed the Constitution, the wives, mothers, sisters and daughters they left behind have been little noticed by history. Roberts brings us the women who fought the Revolution as valiantly as the men, often defending their very doorsteps. While the men went off to war or to Congress, the women managed their businesses, raised their children, provided them with political advice, and made it possible for the men to do what they did...Drawing upon personal correspondence, private journals...surprising stories of these fascinating women...Social history at its best, *Founding Mothers* unveils the drive, determination, creative insight and passion of the *other* patriots, the women who raised our nation.”

Mrs. Roberts’s book delves into the lives of many of the Founding Mothers. This book contains stories of Abigail Adams, Mercy Otis Warren, Deborah Read Franklin, Eliza Pinckney, and Martha Washington to name but a few. Her stories are told from evidence of letters passed between these women, correspondence to their husbands which have survived the centuries, stories that have been passed down through the families as well as extensive research on her subjects.

“It’s not easy to track down these stories. Though we thankfully seem to have every grocery list the Founding Fathers ever wrote, most of the women left no written traces.”[xvii]

The efforts resulted in a wonderful story of fascinating, committed, and strong women upon whose shoulders their husbands depended. According to this writer, most of the Founding Fathers were able to do what they did because of the women with whom they chose to be their partners.

The book contains many stories of the strong wills of several of the women before they were thrust into the story of the Revolution. Eliza Pinckney, for example was the mother of two “major players” in the new nation. At the age of sixteen, she was left with the oversight of the rice family plantations, a sick mother and a little sister while her father was away fighting against Spain. She wrote frequently to her father to tell him of her management of the farm and kept copies of her correspondence. In addition to her business acumen, she was the teacher for her younger sister as well as several of the slave children on the plantations. She even offered legal advice and services to neighbors, even though she had no legal training, she claimed to be an ardent reader and just used good, common sense to work her way through legal issues. On several occasions Eliza turned down marriage proposals in order to stay in the “vegetable world” as she called it [p3] experimenting with different crops, always looking to making a profit. She wanted to make her plantations profitable. She planted oak trees on one plantation with the idea of building ships in the future. She put all of her efforts into growing indigo. In spite of naysayers and many problems she succeeded after many years of trial and error. After some success, in 1744 she employed a dye maker and shipped some dye to England. She also married Charles Pinckney, the widower of her friend the same year. She vowed to be a faithful wife, good mother, temperate and frugal. By 1747 the experiment paid off for Eliza, the Carolina colony and the Mother Country. She and her husband and several children later were sent to England as diplomats and were able to take a break from hard

farming work. She however was widowed at the age of 36 and had children who needed her attentions. She returned to her South Carolina plantations to find them in disrepair because of inept overseers. She worked hard to return them to their former glory. She became increasingly annoyed with the Mother Country and took pride in her “Americanism”. She and her sons became advocates for the “taxation without representation” cause and helped stage “Tea Parties” at the Cooper River. Eliza and her progeny played continued roles in the fight for American Independence.

Another woman of interest was Deborah Read Franklin. Much is written about Ben Franklin and his “interest” in the fairer sex, but choosing Deborah as his “wife” allowed him to stake out America’s claim for independence while she kept the home fires burning. He “took to wife” Deborah Read. She was never able to prove that her first husband had died after he took off with dowry and thus was not legally free to marry. She helped Franklin run his printing office in Philadelphia and over the years took on many other duties, from running his post office. Franklin, in his writings showed an emotional attachment to her. He wrote,

“Frugality is an enriching virtue, a virtue I could never acquire myself, but I was lucky enough to find it in a wife, who thereby became a fortune to me”...at least he talked a good game [sic]. {26}

Franklin and Deborah worked well together and he was able to retire from business at the age of 42 and devote himself to public service. While he was away she had to keep the businesses going while raising their child, Sally and his son from a previous “liaison”. While he was away there were constant insinuations of his infidelities, but Deborah devoted herself to him.

Roberts continues with many interesting anecdotes of other founding mothers. Mercy Otis Warren, whose plays and writings helped the Revolutionary cause, had never seen a play

herself. She wrote inflammatory prose while rearing a large brood. She was the best friend to another Founding Mother, Abigail Adams. While Adams prided herself on promoting the cause of women suffrage and education, Warren contented herself with her “place”.

In addition to stories about the women specifically, Roberts intertwined stories about the deeds of these devoted wives, mothers and daughters. She tells of the power of the gentler sex when united for a cause. It was the women, the consumers of the Colonies who gave strength to the boycotts of the era. It was the ladies who ensured that tea would not be consumed in their homes or businesses. Women also boycotted British cloth. They joined in “spinning bees” where entire communities of women would spin for hours making many skeins of wool which would be later woven into fabric.

“In 1769 the *Boston Evening Post* wrote that the ‘industry and frugality of American ladies must exalt their character in the eyes of the world and serves to show how greatly they are contributing to bring about the political salvation of the whole continent.’...Women could literally drape themselves in the cause of liberty...the women showed up at a gala affair in simple homespun gowns, leaving their imported silks and brocades at home. The Daughters of Liberty organized up and down the colonies, with hundreds of women spinning their wheels and sipping ‘Liberty Tea’, a mixture of herbs and flowers rather than the real thing.” [40]

“A woman’s place was changing.”[40]

“...Congress was an all-male affair; women continued their subversive activities in their parsonages and parlors, with the enthusiastic approval of at least some of the men.” [41]

When the colonies entered into war, women continued to support their men at home, in the fields and at the battle sites. Roberts continues with many anecdotes about the wives of many of the founding fathers, Martha Washington at Valley Forge, nursing the sick soldiers and cooking for others. ‘George Washington might have regretted the presence of so many women in the army, but he wanted his own wife with him. Martha Washington later said that she had heard the opening and closing gun of every military campaign of the Revolution.’ [84]. She tells of Abigail Adams constant support, in letters to her husband John. Additionally she

tells the tale of Phyllis Wheatley writing a poem for George Washington and his inviting her to visit him.

The women also helped to finance the new nation. Ben Franklin suggested to his wife and daughter that he would not send the lace they had requested from France, but rather that they wear their “cambric ruffles as I do and take care not to mend the holes, they will come in time to be lace and feathers.” [146] Most sold of their jewelry to get money and then they melted down their pots and pans to make musket balls in their own homes. They formed “sisterhoods” to promote relief and encouragement for the Continental Army.

“Managing through the war proved a daunting task for all but the most stalwart of women...In fact women ventured into all kinds of spheres [outside the domestic sphere]. They went with soldiers to camp. They served as spies. They organized boycotts of British goods. They raised money for troops. They petitioned the government. As the Daughters of Liberty, they formed a formidable force. They defended their homesteads alone as their husbands hid out, marked men with a price on their heads. The generals on both sides of the Revolutionary War marveled at the strength of the women. The British general Lord Cornwallis paid an even greater tribute: ‘We may destroy all the men in American, and we shall still have all we can do to defeat the women.’ And all the while the women were bearing and burying and rearing children.” [xix]

For all of their sacrifices during the war, Abigail Adams, for one thought that, at long last the efforts would be rewarded in the new government. She urged her husband to look into education for all, men and women. She further urged him to remember his wording in the Massachusetts constitution that all were born free and equal but John Adams did not act on her request.

Other ladies had to find their way in the darkness towards a new nation. Martha Washington had to define her role as the wife of the new President of the United States. Abigail Adams had to define the role of wife of the Vice President and help her husband define his role as Vice President. Both these ladies as well as the wives of countless other government officials had to rally behind the men in their lives to support their energies to

defining and developing a new nation. Their positions were much undefined but they knew that their mission was clear.

“It’s safe to say that most of the men who wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution fought the Revolution, and formed the government couldn’t have done it without the women. And it was the women who, by insisting that the men come together for civilized conversations in the early Washington dinner parties, helped keep the fragile new country from falling into fatal discord. The women made the men behave.” [xvii]

Roberts ends her introduction writing, “They [The Founding Mothers] did-with great hardship, courage, pluck, prayerfulness, sadness, joy, energy, and humor-what women do. They put one foot in front of the other in remarkable circumstances. They carried on. They are truly our Founding Mothers.” {xx}

Roberts, Cokie. Founding Mothers: The Women Who Raised Our Nation. New York:William Morrow, 2004.

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A Book Review

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