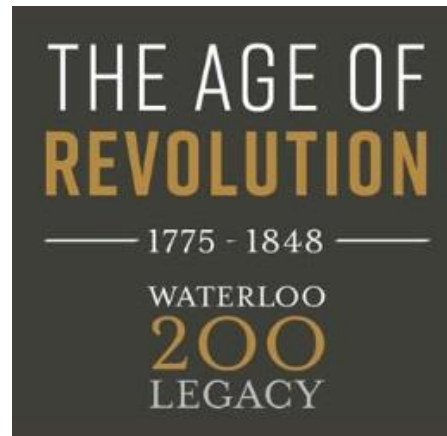


Teacher Fellowship Programme 2018: Teaching the Age of Revolutions



HA Teacher Fellowship resource

Chelsey David

**History is the province of the ladies: the
revolutionary correspondence of Hannah
Winthrop and Mercy Otis Warren**

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Resource rationale and introduction

'History is not the province of the ladies': a damning remark from John Adams, founding father and second President of the United States of America (in a letter to Elbridge Gerry; Zaggari, 2015, p. 162). Adams' remark echoes the typical view of the American Revolution as a tale of heroic fraternity. Men of property, education and enlightened principles gathered together to create a new order based on liberty and the pursuit of happiness, for the good of all under their care and dominion. The far-reaching consequences are still yet to be fully rationalised, and it was instrumental in inspiring cataclysmic political change throughout the next centuries. Yet this is very much a tale of manly action, from the bold patriots attacking tea and their neighbours with equal vim, to the struggles of Washington, the budding statesmen at the Continental Congress and Provincial Assemblies and, drawn from these often-disparate groups, the men who would sign the US Constitution, simultaneously extending and excluding the promise of liberty to so many.

The tale of those who were not able to participate during these events is often lost in the mass swathe of 'all women and children', and many textbooks fail to take account of their journey and participation in these events (Parker, 2017). As others have pointed out, the experience of women is often homogenised with the odd reference to the remarks of Abigail Adams – 'remember the ladies' – and the silent, comforting presence of Martha Washington at Valley Forge. Women in history are viewed as mostly silent and separate, whose inclusions as a few paragraphs in dedicated 'women's experience' sections are a cipher at best and offer little to the overburdened student (Lockeyer and Tazzyman, 2016).

This resource was made with two ambitions in mind: firstly, to allow women's voices to become more mainstream in the teaching of the American Revolution at A-level, and secondly, to bring to light sources that show the rich complexity of the lived experience of the Revolution, even if the authors did not serve in the army or argue in the Continental Congress. The women whose letters make up this resource I believe illustrate this point. While both Mercy Otis Warren and Hannah Winthrop have their limitations and were in many ways exceptional, due to their education, supportive husbands and wealthy positions, they do, however, offer us fascinating glimpses into life during the Revolution. These were women who lost much over the course of the Revolution: possessions, security, friends and family. And yet they gained much in practical political education, reading radical pamphlets, attending meetings and meeting luminaries of the age. Mercy Otis Warren even took up her pen to skewer those in politics, publishing her work to a wide audience and later writing the first history of the Revolution by a woman. It was her piercing account of her great friend John Adams that led him to write the quote above and created a seven-year-long feud between the two families, despite the Warrens' mentoring and friendship with the young John and Mercy's close friendship with Abigail.

The use of women's correspondence also ties in with current trends in the historiography of the American Revolution. Since the 1970s there have been calls for and much work on the role of women in the revolution, and more recently focus has shifted to examining correspondence between women as a way to evaluate changes and the lived experience of the revolution (Damiano, 2017; Norton, 1980; Kerber, 1996). The sources here are designed either to be used as a full collection, geared towards an overarching enquiry, or to be dipped into on an ad hoc basis as suits the need of the teacher. They are all linked by the three key themes of developing political thought, women's experience of the Revolution and the effect of war and revolution on the people. Potential questions for each source as well as an overarching enquiry question are provided to help the reader, as well as a timeline of the Revolution and lives of the ladies Warren and Winthrop to help contextualise the letters, biographical sketches of each and potential routes for further reading. All of the letters have been simplified from their original eighteenth-century language for ease of use, but links to the originals have also been included. For simplicity's sake, several extracts of lengthy poetry have also been removed from this edited version but can be found in the originals.

All of the letters reproduced here can be found in the online archive of the Massachusetts Historical Society, who have preserved and digitalised the Winthrop–Warren correspondence, which can be found online in its entirety at: <http://www.masshist.org/features/warren-winthrop>.

The work completed here was possible thanks to the officers of the Massachusetts Historical Society and the Historical Association.

Overarching enquiry question:

Using the letters of Hannah Winthrop and Mercy Otis Warren, what can we learn about attitudes towards and the effects of the American Revolution?

In the course of this enquiry, the sources provide excellent insights into the following, which you may wish to consider:

- Political thought
- Role of the politicians
- Warfare and soldiers
- The role and life of women

Biographical information

Mercy Otis Warren

Born to a wealthy and politically active Massachusetts family in 1728, Mercy enjoyed a life rich in privilege and education. Her parents allowed her to be educated equally alongside her brothers, who then assisted her continuing education by sending and discussing books from their university studies at Harvard. She was especially close to her brother James Otis, who was to become an outspoken radical in Massachusetts during the Revolution. She married the scholarly and wealthy James Warren at the slightly older-than-average age of 26. James Warren continued to climb the ranks of Massachusetts political life, serving in the legislature and assembly, while having a very public feud with Governor Hutchinson, whom he had competed against early in his career. While managing several houses, a farm and having five sons, Mercy also found time to write to her numerous female friends, including Abigail Adams and the English radical and historian Catherine Macaulay. She also maintained a close friendship with John Adams, who initially deeply respected her opinion on politics. During the Revolution, she wrote several anonymous propaganda plays skewering Hutchinson and the British loyalists, as she supported the political interest of her friends and family and, in certain groups, was viewed as a 'secret literary weapon against the British' (Zaggari, 2015, p. 95).¹ She and her husband were considered key figures of the Revolution in Massachusetts, and frequently hosted other key figures in their home at Plymouth and on the Eel River. She was, through her husband's work as a paymaster in the Continental Army, able to meet George and Martha Washington. Unfortunately, with the early retirement of her husband after political and military disagreements in 1776–1777, many began to view them as shirkers, who left the cause just at the moment at which they were needed (Zaggari, 2015, pp. 95–110). The aftermath of the Revolution also saw them beset with personal tragedy, with the deaths of their sons Charles in 1789 and Winslow in 1791, alongside Mercy's friend Hannah Winthrop in 1790. After continued bouts of depression, Mercy eventually completed a three-volume *History of the American Revolution* in 1805 to critical acclaim and strong sales, as well as publishing her earlier poems and plays under her own name. Unfortunately, this work, which had given her so much drive and hope, had the effect of destroying her close friendship with the Adams due to her (not unfair) criticisms of his presidency. For many years, John sent threatening and angry letters and forbade Abigail from communicating with Mercy. They were reconciled after seven years in 1812, though the friendship never fully recovered, and John continued to make disparaging

¹ See also Massachusetts Historical Society, Biographical sketch of Mercy Otis Warren, <http://www.masshist.org/features/warren-winthrop/sketches#warren>

remarks about her to others (Zaggari, 2015, pp. 146–163). Mercy died not long afterwards in 1814.²

Hannah Winthrop

Very little is known of Hannah Winthrop's early life; no date of birth has been recorded, only her baptism in February 1727. Little is known of her education but she certainly received one, judging from the contents of her letters, where she easily makes reference to key figures from history, classical mythology and the Bible, and she later developed a keen interest in politics and political thought. She initially married Parr Tollman, who died not long into the marriage, and in 1756 she married again to John Winthrop, a professor of mathematics and science at Harvard University, who spent much of his time researching in his astronomy tower. John Winthrop was also the descendent of another John Winthrop, the puritan founder of the Massachusetts Colony in the seventeenth century. Unsurprisingly, Hannah's letters show a clear devotion to her Protestant faith, which guides much of her thought and attitudes during the turbulent years of the Revolution, though this is often intermixed with the classical figures and radical opinions popular during the enlightenment. Her letters show a clear commitment to education, given her rage at the treatment of Harvard and its scholars during the war, as well as an eagerness to learn more about politics and the reading of political pamphlets. A devoted supporter of the Revolution with her husband, she was a great supporter of Mercy's 'unladylike' writing career and the political career of James Warren. Hannah Winthrop died in 1790 (Zaggari, 2015, pp. 71, 82–86, 110, 138, 160).³

Further reading

Zaggari, R. (2015) *A Woman's Dilemma, Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution*, Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.

Norton, M.B. (1980) *Liberty's Daughters: the revolutionary experience of American women, 1750–1800*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Kerber, L. (1996) *Women of the Republic: intellect and ideology in revolutionary America*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

² See also Massachusetts Historical Society, Biographical sketch of Mercy Otis Warren, <http://www.masshist.org/features/warren-winthrop/sketches#warren>

³ See also Massachusetts Historical Society, Biographical sketch of Hannah Winthrop, <http://www.masshist.org/features/warren-winthrop/sketches#winthrop>

Letter 1: Hannah Winthrop to Mercy Otis Warren, 29 April 1769, 'Daughters of Liberty'

Original letter and transcription: <http://www.masshist.org/database/3321>

Dear Mrs Warren,

I am sorry for the delay in taking nearly five months to reply to your letter, but I have been busy with my husband's illness,⁴ and this along with the gloominess of winter has got me down of late.

The general variances of life and fate mean I am sure that you will join in sympathising with your friends in both good times and bad. I know it is frowned upon to dwell on the death, but I cannot stop thinking of Sophronia.⁵ I cannot quite believe it, as my last memory of her is surrounded by friends and visitors at her oldest daughter's wedding. And for her to be taken from life at such a happy moment, leaving a loving husband and her flock of little children, is truly tragic.

I visited Mrs Otis the other day, and she does not seem in good health. I received a visit from Master Jeremy recently and will tell you a funny story. A gentleman was telling him what a fine lady his mother is and hoped that he would be a good boy for her, and the little boy had a good answer. He said I know my mother is a fine lady, but she would be a much better one if she was a Daughter of Liberty.⁶

I hope the approach of the good weather will give you an opportunity for visiting us and that Major Warren will be among the politicians and writers again.⁷ Mr Winthrop sends his best wishes and I hope the length of this letter will make up for its delay.

⁴ Hannah Winthrop was married to John Winthrop, a professor of mathematics and science (astronomy) at Harvard University. Winthrop was her second husband and descended from the Winthrops who had actually created Massachusetts in the seventeenth century. Many of her letters contain references to his frequent ill health and subsequent recoveries; some of this may have been in part due to the fact that Hannah's first husband Parr Tolman had died young.

⁵ Sophronia means sensible in Greek. Virtue names such as Mercy, Temperance and Patience, and their forms in Greek, such as Sophia (wisdom), were popular among the early puritans of Massachusetts and continued with their decedents into the eighteenth century.

⁶ A term referred to by patriotic American women during the Revolution who actively supported the cause by public acts.

⁷ At around this time, the Warrens were emerging as leading figures in politics and the Revolution in Massachusetts. By 1767, they had become firm friends with John and Abigail Adams, and James Warren was elected into the Massachusetts House, as well as authoring a leading pamphlet attacking the Stamp Acts and British taxation. Mercy would continually pester him in letters and then in poems to come home and enjoy domestic comforts and simple family virtues.

Your affectionate friend,
Hannah Winthrop

P.S. My husband has sent Mr Warren a Pamphlet, which he hopes he will accept.

Questions to consider

1. How is revolutionary thought developing in this period? What events are helping this develop?
2. What can we learn about the lives of married women and children in this period from this letter?

Letter 2: Mercy Otis Warren to Hannah Winthrop, April 1773, 'Pantomime of politics'

Original letter and transcription: <http://www.masshist.org/database/3369>

To Hannah Winthrop,

While my dearest friends have had to go through the most painful of life's trials, they do so with the support of all, which I believe is good compensation for their troubles. But I realised I have addressed myself to you both, and I am sure that despite his great genius and Christian virtue, he [Mr Winthrop] will not mind me over-excitedly offering my friendship and support, though it is not really needed here. Are you really in danger of sadness with such a man by your side? Or does the resumption of work bitter your current enjoyment? I will always be ready to help you, my friend, but don't think that your worries are likely to come true, so do stop worrying. I share your sorrows as well as your joys, and hope that your hopes and wishes will come true.

In answer to your earlier letter, you are right when you say I would not swap my quiet life for one of modern, fashionable leisure. I am in fact so far removed from the centres of politics that I don't understand what you mean by lectures on buffoonery,⁸ but the farce of everyday politics shows puppet politicians, who once they have done their part disappear as quietly as possible, lacking as much reason and thinking capacity as a piece of painted scenery.

I will only say that in the grand pantomime of politics [he]⁹ must get his strings re-strung and a new tune to sing in his song of passive obedience if he is to lull the guardians of American Liberty into agreement with both his speeches and proposed measures, before the American people become the property of distant lords.

⁸ This is referred to in the letter directly preceding this one from Hannah Winthrop, 12 April 1773. Winthrop lists at length all the attractions of fashionable living, such as concerts and balls, as well as Morgan's lectures on buffoonery, before dismissing them all and expressing contentment with her life. Morgan's identity remains unclear.

⁹ She refers here to Thomas Hutchinson, a fellow Massachusetts politician and long-term family rival of both the Otises and the Warrens. He and Mr Warren were in opposition and competing for the same jobs for much of their adult lives. Warren lost out on several jobs, including a seat on the state superior court, a place that Hutchinson then used to decide cases (sometimes defended by Mercy's brother) in favour of the British Crown at the expense of the colonists. He was often viewed as being surrounded by fawning cronies instead of competent advisors. The bad relationship intensified during the revolutionary period, as Hutchinson was seen more and more as an agent of the British Crown, while the Otises and the Warrens were at the forefront of revolutionary writing and sentiment. Their enmity came to a peak when Hutchinson was made acting governor of Massachusetts and was later blamed by the colonists for the events of the Boston Massacre. The 'pantomime of politics' is Hutchinson's dispute with the Massachusetts House over Britain's right to tax the colonies.

I remain your affectionate,
M. Warren¹⁰

Questions to consider

1. What can we learn about changes to the role of wealthy and middle-class women from this letter?
2. What impression does Mercy Otis Warren give of the professional politicians of this time? How do you think a woman living quietly in the countryside had come by such knowledge?
3. Mercy later describes Hutchinson as a dark, ambitious, corrupt and cruel man;¹¹ come to a conclusion regarding how far you agree or disagree with Mercy's statement.

¹⁰ Mercy wrote a play viciously attacking Hutchinson called *The Adulterer* in 1772; the full version can be found at: <https://archive.org/details/adulateurtrag00warrich>. Her often cruel descriptions of Hutchinson (known as Raptio, a synonym for greed) are well worth a read, as is her adaptation of the events of the Boston Massacre; they would have been gleaned from accounts from family and political friends in the city. However, the play was not actually published until two years after the event. The writing of a play was an unusual step for a woman at this time, especially as it was forbidden to actually perform plays in Massachusetts as they were viewed as utterly scandalous, a legacy of its Puritan foundation. Mercy wrote the play anonymously, probably never having seen a play in her life or intending for it to be performed, but it did help to spark her writing career, which would later enable her to create effective propaganda for the Revolution and give her the confidence to write her great work on the *History of the American Revolution*.

¹¹ From her *History of the American Revolution*.

Letter 3: Hannah Winthrop to Mercy Otis Warren, 1 January 1774, 'Even daughters are politicians'

Original letter and transcription: <http://www.masshist.org/database/3330>

I wrote to Mrs Warren on November 10th but have yet to hear a reply; I know your son has visited but I am concerned that you have been ill.

I have no domestic news to tell you; we go on as usual, but are amused and sometimes astonished at what is going on in the wider world, as we have seen a seat at the table of power becoming suddenly vacant and in a surprising manner. But it is for the best for a person so near the seat of power where truth should reign to hide what could be kindly called human failings. I know you join me in wishing that the position will be filled by a person who could excel in the role. Beyond the destruction of the detestable weed,¹² which is made with cruel deliberateness and engages our attention, the virtuous and noble sons of America, in defiance of threatened attacks and misery from despots, demand our highest respect, and that they may have the determination to carry on until they come off as the victors is to be hoped.

I was sorry to see the protest at Plymouth; if we could match alliances and ambitions with names, we could see who and what influenced them.¹³ We hope to hear a good account of the tea cast into the sea. The union of the colonies and determination of the people is a good sign for us all. And Britain should know that even America's Daughters are politicians and Patriots and will aid the good struggle with their womanly efforts.¹⁴

Mr Winthrop sends his best wishes and mine, and love to your boys.

P.S. I have not had a letter from you since September 27th 1773

¹² Tea.

¹³ Protests in the wake of both the Tea Party and the subsequent Intolerable Acts were common from both sides of the political divide, especially as townspeople and merchants resented the loss of profits.

¹⁴ Many women at this point took up traditional female occupations, such as spinning and needlework, and used them to support the Revolution; others were inspired to engage in more active and public participation.

Questions to consider

1. What is Hannah's opinion of professional politicians? What events and actions might have helped shape her view?
2. How does she view the British and Americans? Is it surprising that Hannah Winthrop views British products and American patriots in this way? Can her account be supported and challenged?
3. To what extent were women 'politicians' in this period? In what sense is Hannah Winthrop using this term?

Letter 4: Hannah Winthrop to Mercy Otis Warren, circa May 1775, 'Flight from the British troops'

Original letter and transcription: <http://www.masshist.org/database/3335>

Can the friend of my heart question whether the greatest troubles can erase or damage a friendship? No, but since our troubles and losing our home I have felt weakened and been unable to do anything that gave me pleasure. Nor can I forget the cry before the massacre at Lexington,¹⁵ when we were woken by bells and drums with the news that a thousand king's troops were coming to murder in all the surrounding villages. A few hours into the day convinced us of this as a reality. The platoon firing convinced us that the day would see carnage, not knowing what would happen in Cambridge at the return of the ruffians and seeing another Brigade dispatched to help, looking like a horde of ferocious Barbarians. It seemed wise to escape to safety until this had passed. My husband had been ill the last two weeks, and after dinner¹⁶ we set out, not knowing where we went, until we were directed to a place called Fresh Pond about a mile from town. But what a sad house we found, filled with 70–80 women whose husbands had gone to fight the enemy, with numerous children, who, like the women, were crying and agonising over the fate of the fathers and older children. In addition to this, for some time we could see the Battle and the glittering instruments of death were constantly firing; much blood must have been shed and many a widow and orphan left as a result of this persecuting barbarity of British Tyranny. We passed another uncomfortable night, some asleep in chairs, others on the floor. The welcome dawn brought us news that the enemy were advancing up the river and were firing on the town,¹⁷ and that to stay in this place was now impractical; at this time I think I understood how Eve felt when expelled from the Garden of Eden.

[Poem omitted but can be found in the original]

So we were driven to Andover, following friends, five of us in one carriage pulled by one tired horse. We took turns walking and riding; the roads were filled with frightened women and children. Some were in carts with their furniture, others on foot fleeing into the wood, but what caused us the greatest horror was passing

¹⁵ The Battle of Lexington – Concord, 19 April 1775.

¹⁶ The main meal was usually eaten at midday during much of the eighteenth century, especially in rural areas, with a lighter 'supper' served later in the evening.

¹⁷ Cambridge, Massachusetts.

through the bloody field at Menotomy,¹⁸ which was strewn with mangled bodies. We met a father with a cart looking for his murdered son and he was picking up his dead neighbours for burial.

I would not have chosen this town for a stay as it is 20 miles from the coast and ports where the navy and pirates are stationed, but I see that we have little control over our lives. As you ask about our place, I can say that it is rural and romantic. In a quiet spot, with few houses and within a mile of neighbours, the house is decent, with trees, flowers, meadows and waving grain.

From the quiet of the nearby wood I can imagine we are the only people alive, but I would still rather have friendly chat and company, though the family we live with are pleasant. But the dark events show the vanity of human life, nor can I stop crying over Harvard, the glory of this land, which now faces war rather than calm philosophy. The youth dispersed and the library now useless, and I worry it will fall to the British, who would love to plunge us into ignorance so that we would all be better suited to slavery and despotic rule. I wonder if we will ever return to our dear home and my husband his study of astronomy.

When I think of my friend's sufferings in Boston I am ashamed of my own reaction to the struggles we should all expect to meet before these unnatural campaigns are over. I often indulge in fears. I have not seen my son since his return from the sea. It is good to see that our sons possess a love of liberty, which will lead them to engage in the cause of their bleeding country. I would love to visit you in your happy home, but the long journey and uncertain times prevent this. We are cut off from all our resources and work, but like many an exile we must follow the example of those in the Bible. Please let us hear from you as often as possible.

As many British Patriots have (according to a friend of mine) begun lately signing letters with expressions of sentiment and affection, rather than a signature, I here follow their example.

I and my husband send you our deepest affection.

Questions to consider

1. How typical were these events for New England – was it an active field of battle compared to other parts of the old 13 colonies? What can we learn about troops' and civilians' attitudes?

¹⁸ Menotomy is now known as Arlington, Massachusetts; the battle was staged between the towns of Cambridge, Lexington, Concord, Lincoln and Menotomy.

2. What does the letter tell us about the plight and roles of women and children in the war at this point? Are all people equal in the struggle?
3. Do we think Hannah's position typical of refugee women? How might this affect the use of her account?

Letter 5: Mercy Otis Warren to Hannah Winthrop, 3 June 1775, 'Justice at Bayonet Point'

Original letter and transcription: <http://www.masshist.org/database/3376>

My Dear Mrs Winthrop,

Can the troubles we face or the distance between us be the reason why I have not heard from you since you were driven from your home by an army of ruffians (though wearing uniform)? How horrible are king's titles when a king forgets his sacred duties and goes from the father of this people to become their persecutor and tyrant, who only listens to corrupt flatterers. And is America to be hunted down by the barbaric Nimrods of the eighteenth century,¹⁹ who, like the forefathers, felt terror and disgust long before Christian feelings and attitudes? But I will drop politics to ask after you, my friends; are you staying somewhere pleasant, and do you have the opportunity to live well if thriftily,²⁰ near places of learning, though thinking and theorising on science and philosophy must give way to war now. I cannot even begin to describe how I feel when I think of the University, a place of calm learning and philosophy, now occupied by loud and rough soldiers. Instead of thoughts and debates and the music of the spheres,²¹ instead all there is now is the sound of the guns and the clarion cry of war. The Berkshire boys and their neighbours from Stockbridge,²² while brave, I can't imagine care much about either Newton or Descartes, but if their bravery will stop the sons of rapine²³ from destroying all the effects of good literature, without which we would all be plunged into slavery and misery, we can't therefore begrudge these simple boys a stay in the habitat of a genius who used that space to map and observe the heavens and the work of God with joy.²⁴

¹⁹ Warren here makes a classical allusion to Nimrod and his followers. Nimrod was an ancient Assyrian hero and god, who is referred to in the Bible. She is alluding to the pagan and barbaric roots of British culture, as opposed to the enlightened start of America, especially Massachusetts, which was founded on Puritan religious principles.

²⁰ Thrift was considered the ultimate housewifely virtue from the earliest days of puritan North America.

²¹ An ancient concept in philosophy and science, meant to correspond to the movement of the 'heavenly bodies', which are the sun, moon and planets.

²² Local fighting units from New England.

²³ Rapine is the violent seizure of another's property, similar to looting.

²⁴ A reference to Mr Winthrop's astronomy tower at Harvard and his work as a professor of that subject.

I have long expected that this contest with Britain must be decided by the sword and that it would end for the glory of America; we have made the last appeal and now justice is demanded at the point of a bayonet, which could not be gotten by patience, petitions, self-denial and argument. Though a vindictive foreign power, it can no longer be allowed to use us as their playthings. Yet I fear we will have many difficulties to struggle through before we are at peace again, and obedient to a government built upon principles of fairness, which will result in the happiest of societies. But as I wish to avoid criticisms from the wiser part of the community, I will say no more on politics, especially when the odds are weighted evenly between the two sides, and even the cleverest among us cannot see whether the balance will fall on the side of against virtue and freedom, and whether we will not long be ruled by attackers and oppressive adversaries.

Your son unexpectedly dropped in on us last evening; I congratulate you on his safe arrival, though this is far from a peaceful haven, yet I imagine a young man of his vitality and spirit would like to take part in the noble struggle of his country in defence of the freedom that the cruel foe would curtail.

I desperately want to see you both and will be ready to meet you at my father-in-law's house after they have visited their friend.²⁵

M. Warren

Questions to consider

1. How far do you agree with Mercy's assessment of British soldiers and politicians in this period of the Revolution?
2. To what extent is she correct in her assessment that the Revolution and the difficulties with Britain could only be solved by warfare?
3. Who is she referring to as the wiser part of the community? Why would she be unwilling to include herself in this category?

²⁵ This is rather unclear, as Mercy's father-in-law had been dead since 1757. It could refer to the Winthrops coming to see Mercy at the house she inherited from her father-in-law – an estate and farm on the Eel River known as 'Clifford' – rather than at their townhouse in Plymouth, where she spent most of her time and which she had bought with John together as their family home.

Letter 6: Hannah Winthrop to Mercy Otis Warren, 17 August 1775, 'Account of women's war work and treatment by the British'

Original letter and transcription: <http://www.masshist.org/database/3337>

Dear Mrs Warren, the friend and sister of my heart,

What a great consolation it is that although the greed and wicked actions of some people have deprived us of many of life's pleasures, they cannot take from us the joy of friendship and conversation. The contrast is striking!

From how you assassinate the characters of the British generals, I do hope their wicked actions will soon be stopped. I love your description of General Washington! Mustn't we expect success under the leadership of such a person? But my heart bleeds for the people of Boston and my blood boils with anger at their treatment under General Gage. Can anything equal his barbarity, turning the poor out of town without any means of support, and from those people items and money, stopping and searching them, and not allowing them to take anything? Can anything match the distress of parents separated from their children? The loving husband detained in cruel captivity from the wife of his heart, and she torn with anxiety over the tyrant's vengeance and his wicked advisors? Can God look at these events and do nothing? Is not a retribution at hand? If things continue in this way, what will happen if we have a severe winter? How many will die of cold and want? Whether you are clothed and warm will be of little use to the trembling and hungry of soul of those who lived in comfort. I believe there was only once in history that such a person was a tyrant like this, Cesare Borgia,²⁶ whose cruelty would make anyone at any time shudder.

You kindly ask after my sister: I have seen her once since the Charleston fire,²⁷ she is poorly off in Stoneham; I found her and my brother-in-law Manson too much

²⁶ The illegitimate son of Pope Alexander VI, originally an archbishop and cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church, he later resigned these offices to become a mercenary and soldier. He and his father, the Pope, used the papal army (which was meant to be used to protect Rome and Christian pilgrims) to conquer huge chunks of Northern Italy to create a new 'Borgia state' for themselves. He was famous for his cruelty, notably his treatment of Caterina Sforza, the Lady of Forli and Imola, who, after defending her castle against him, was later imprisoned, tortured and abused by him. However, for the people of the lands he conquered, his efficient rule was actually seen as an improvement, and many rulers respected him and awarded him honours and titles in his lifetime. His personal life was allegedly equally colourful and led to scandalous rumors continuing about him long after his death. He and his family were often held up by Protestants in the Reformation as examples of all that was corrupt and sinful in the Catholic Church.

²⁷ Charlestown, now a district in the city of Boston, was originally a separate town. In June of 1775, the Battle of Bunker Hill took place and resulted in the destruction of most of the town. It was not rebuilt until the 1780s, suggesting that Hannah is right here to fear for her family members.

affected by their losses. I think their future prospects are discouraging. He has been out of business for a year and has a large family to provide for. He is old, and losing his home to a barbarous enemy is a torment. Where in history can you find such villainy? They burnt the whole town to ashes, after repeated promises to the people that if they would protect their troops on their return from Concord it would be the last place to be harmed. They gave shelter to the wounded and dying soldiers, in their homes and in their beds, the women putting balm on their wounds and making soups and medicines for them, supporting them, and at a time when women were not used to the sight of trickling blood and gaping wounds. Some died blessing the women who had given them aid, and in return for this kindness they took the first opportunity to make 500 households miserable, involving many a poor orphan and widow in a common ruin. Heaven should be astonished and America tremble at the idea of falling into the hands of this foe!²⁸

But on a happier note, I rejoice at the appointment of your husband to an honourable and profitable post;²⁹ the strength and care with which he has worked in the field of patriotic virtue, through much toil and self-denial, I think means a great deal to his country, and it must give pleasure to every friend of liberty to see such dedicated service rewarded before the warfare is finished. May he long be a blessing to his country and reap the rewards of his work in peace.

I now write from Andover, in reduced circumstances, yet my firm faith in this glorious [cause] of virtue, truth and justice is not reduced. Your faith that the united efforts [of the people] will be met with success gives me strength. Your enthusiasm is infectious, knowing that your faith has a basis, and your friendship with those in power must enable you to form a better judgement than others.³⁰

I apologise for this scrawl; please send my regards to Colonel Warren.

Your affectionate friend,

Hannah Winthrop

²⁸ Hospitality was a revered virtue among Christians at this time, and was given an honored place in the Bible. To treat those who had offered you hospitality when you were in need in such a way, especially after giving your word, would have been horrendous to most people at this time.

²⁹ In 1774, James Warren was elected president of the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts, on top of his responsibility of being chairman of the Massachusetts Committee of Correspondence. In 1775, he was elected Speaker of the House.

³⁰ As mentioned before, the Warren and Otis families were connected to most of the prominent political families of New England, and at this time Mercy was corresponding with both John and Abigail Adams.

Andover

Questions to consider

1. Do we agree with her assessments of the military figures, both British and American, and to what extent can her account be supported and challenged?
2. 'The role of women essentially stayed the same during the revolution and war.' To what extent do we agree with this statement after reading this letter and others in the collection?
3. To what extent has the war of revolution affected the local community in Massachusetts?

Letter 7: Hannah Winthrop to Mercy Otis Warren, 2 April 1776, 'Common sense reviewed'

Original letter and transcription: <http://www.masshist.org/database/3342>

My dear Philomela,³¹

I congratulate you both on the return of spring and the changing fate of our affairs, delivering us from the barbarian troops of George III; let us thank God for this. By defeating our enemies and taking their strongholds, which doubtless would otherwise have caused the deaths of thousands and rivers would have run with blood, I think all this was spared by an act of God. It would be pointless for me to repeat the wise steps taken by Washington,³² as I don't doubt you know all the details, but this achievement of this was a wonderful sight in our eyes³³ and my heart is bursting with gratitude. But the destruction of Boston and the devastation of Charlestown and Cambridge, as well as the ruin of happy families, also draw on our sympathies. I hope that God will aid them in their sufferings.

[Poem follows but omitted]

When I write to you, my friend, who is so well versed in politics, I can't stop myself from chatting to you about the subject as a way of learning more about it.

You have read the celebrated pamphlet *Common Sense* and the appendix in last Thursday's paper.³⁴ I would love to know your opinion on the last paragraph, which

³¹ Nicknaming from the classical myths of Greece and Rome was popular among educated women in eighteenth-century letters. Philomela is an odd choice for the happily married Mrs Warren, as in the myth she was raped and then had her tongue cut out by her brother-in-law. However, Philomela was considered an inspiration to those engaged in the creative arts, especially the writing of poems and verses, which perhaps explains why she was chosen for Warren's nickname.

³² I take this to mean Washington forcing the British out of Boston in the spring of 1776.

³³ Reference to Psalm 118: 'this is the work of the Lord and it is marvellous in our eyes'. These words were also famously uttered by Queen Elizabeth I on becoming queen on the death of the Catholic Mary I (known as Bloody Mary for her burning of Protestant believers in England), and her accession was thought to be a turning point from a barbarous time of persecution and suffering. The reference would not be lost on either lady, given their earlier discussion of Cesare Borgia and their familiarity with history.

³⁴ *Common Sense*, written by the revolutionary British writer Thomas Paine, was published in January 1776. The pamphlet was a bestseller. Paine argues for a complete break with Britain and the end of the monarchy.

argues for an act of oblivion.³⁵ I think the Whigs, who have lost everything dear in life, must have souls greater than the average man to agree to such an article.³⁶ Think, whether the horror of setting aside conscience for the Tories,³⁷ they would have been in much better circumstances than those who have struggled through all the dangers and difficulties but have nothing ahead of them but poverty and want? Such an article seems aimed at Philadelphia, which has avoided all suffering and I think it will hardly suit the mood of Boston and Charleston.

I'm glad that your husband is better; I heard of his illness and you both have our sympathies.³⁸

The size of your last piece of writing was very agreeable, especially as I have so little to occupy me. I have been growing old in a corner of a country village this last winter, and I have put up with bad accommodation in the hope of better. I shall be happy when the university starts again, and we can all sit and be safe under its roof.

I beg you to send my best wishes to Colonel Warren.
I sign off with the nickname Honoria³⁹ you once gave me.

Honoria

April 2nd 1776, Concord

³⁵ The last paragraph of *Common Sense* is Paine's appeal for America to declare independence from Britain, an event that was soon to follow its publication.

³⁶ The Whigs were the main supporters of the Revolution. Many of them had lost personal property, family and political power in their support of the Revolution.

³⁷ The main supporters of the British during this period, an act of conscience that Hannah views as 'horrible'.

³⁸ The final paragraph, which expresses Hannah's missed opportunity to see the Warrens at Watertown and her thoughts on Mercy's two plays, has been removed, but can be accessed online with the full unedited version of the letter. *The Group* was a play written by Mercy Otis Warren. *The Group*, published in April 1775, ridicules the British loyalist community in Boston, and Zaggari believes that its publication helped to persuade Bostonians to active resistance.

³⁹ Although a very popular name in Massachusetts, meaning that the owner is honorable, the historical Honoria was considered a scandal in her time during the fifth century. When her brother, the Roman Emperor, tried to arrange her marriage to a senator not of her choosing, Honoria sent her ring with a plea for help and love to Attila the Hun, her brother's greatest enemy. He saw this as both a marriage proposal and an excuse to invade the western half of the Roman Empire. Honoria was later exiled from the Roman Empire.

Questions to consider

1. What can we learn from this source about changing reading patterns and readership in New England during the Revolution?
2. To what extent does Hannah Winthrop's view of *Common Sense* reflect the general attitude to this piece in America at the time of its publication?
3. How are the different political parties of America presented in this document?
4. How far can we generalise about women's attitudes towards political writing from this source? What are its strengths and limitations?

Letter 8: Hannah Winthrop to Mercy Otis Warren, circa August 1776, 'On the sudden retirement of Colonel Warren'

Original letter and transcription: <http://www.masshist.org/database/3345>

It would be beyond accepted feminine behaviour if I were to address General Warren on a subject close to my heart;⁴⁰ however, your closeness and indulgence in chit-chatting with me allows me to speak to you about my unease at hearing that General Warren is thinking of retiring from public office at a time when we need all our most skilful men. His talents make him ideal for holding office. How would you feel, Mrs Warren, if you were an impartial observer to this tragedy? To see one of the best who has been involved in all the key moments, who has served with loyalty and to the applause of others, to see such a person leave now, with all the remaining drama yet to come, to incapacitated and ill-wishing figures? Wouldn't you expect it all to end in farce and chaos? I have doubts not only to the propriety, but also his right to do this, as a true patriot and one of the first politicians, and at such a time. By his good work and behaviour, he has gained attention and become public property and can't leave until this grand affair is over. Perhaps General Warren has not been treated respectfully by some of those in power, but this should not be a reason for deserting public work.⁴¹ I remember the sayings of an ancient wise man: 'If the spirit of the ruler rises up against you, don't leave your place.'⁴² You are not insensible of the fact that by doing this you are increasing the power of the enemies of our glorious cause and upsetting the balance of power in favour of people like the tip-toeing gentry, who, like Argus,⁴³ are on the watch to increase their power and derail the cause.

⁴⁰ Puritan morality, which pervaded among Americans for a long time, had strict rules about who and how one could communicate with a married woman. Certainly, it would have been considered highly improper for a woman to directly criticise a male politician on his duty and work, given the fact that women were considered mere helpmates and subordinate to men at this time.

⁴¹ Zaggari notes that from 1777 Warren had suffered a series of political defeats, including an act to stop monopolies, which was openly rejected by the Massachusetts Assembly, as well as the people of Massachusetts rejecting the State Constitution, of which he had been a major author. All of these problems had their roots in the evacuation of Boston and the fall-out from this in Massachusetts in 1776, as well as disputes over Warren's role in the military, where he was on the Naval Board of the Eastern Department, a Major General and a Paymaster, despite not actually serving in any actions.

⁴² From the Bible, Ecclesiastes 10, attributed to Solomon, the wisest of the biblical kings in the Old Testament.

⁴³ Argus here could refer to the faithful dog of Odysseus, who nearly derails his plans of sneaking into his home and reclaiming his wife Penelope, after being away from home for many years fighting in the Trojan War. More likely, it refers to the monstrous 100-eyed giant Argus Panoptes (the all-seeing), who had 100 all-seeing eyes and was the henchman of the often-spurned and angry wife of Zeus, Hera. He was famously derailed on his mission to keep Zeus from having an affair with the nymph Io, despite the fact that she had been enchanted to look like a cow at that time.

How happy they would be at the falling off of patriots. Great happiness was among the B-h⁴⁴ when they heard that General Hancock had left Congress.⁴⁵

I am aware that those who work towards liberty are not well rewarded for it. It is hard and cruel, and we all know this at least in theory. The evil of our time is to ignore a Golden Rule. I have often seen that when men who are long-serving public servants step aside, they are too likely to feel that they are out of date, grow too serious and lose their relish for an active life. I must honestly say to you my friend that I do not approve of this plan. If you think that I deserve to be criticised for saying this, please do, but it comes from friendship.

I hear that Mr Temple has come to Boston; let me know what he says and how matters stand. Mr Winthrop joins me in sending our best wishes to you and General Warren. If he should find this letter in your cabinet, I will apologise to him another time. Mr Winthrop is growing better.

I write to you as your unalterable

Hannah Winthrop

Cambridge, Thursday morning

P.S. I intended to send this letter with your son, but he was so eager to see his mother that he left too early to take it.⁴⁶

Questions to consider

1. How is the role of the politician presented here and what can we learn about the nature of politics within Massachusetts?
2. If Hannah was so concerned with propriety, why has she written this letter? What does this suggest about the role of women at a time of revolution?

⁴⁴ This I take to mean British, which she is now using as an obscenity.

⁴⁵ This appears to refer to John Hancock, who in 1776 was president of the Continental Congress. It seems that he did not quit Congress at this time. It likely refers to the fact that the Congress fled Philadelphia in 1776 due to fighting with the British in New York and New Jersey. Zaggari also notes that by this period, Hancock had become a moderate, and wanted to play down the radical democratic demands of the early Revolution in favour of economic reforms and 'pandering' to popular sentiment. Hancock and Warren would later become enemies, with Hancock helping to destroy Warren's political career in 1778.

⁴⁶ This perhaps explains how Hannah was able to hear of Warren's retirement plans before they had become public knowledge.

3. What can we learn about privacy within the home and communication? Were these letters intended to be read aloud or alone?
4. Has Hannah's view of the Revolution changed over the course of her troubles?

Letter 9: Hannah Winthrop to Mercy Otis Warren, 11 November 1777, 'Hessians in Cambridge'

Original letter and transcription: <http://www.masshist.org/database/3349>

It is not long since I wrote to you of my disappointment of not paying you a visit. I think you are now wondering how your friends at Cambridge are, who at this time are deluged with British and Hessians,⁴⁷ who are prancing and patrolling at every corner of the town, covered with their glistening guns. A short description may amuse you as well as allow you to form an opinion of our unhappy circumstances.

Last Thursday, a very stormy day, a large number of British troops came softly through the town to Watertown and Prospect Hill. On Friday, we heard the Hessians were to process along the same route; we wanted nothing to do with them, just watch as they passed. It was an astonishing sight; I had no idea God could create such a sordid set of creatures – poor, dirty, emaciated men, great numbers of women who seemed to be beasts of burden, they had baskets on their back and were bent double, the contents seemed to be pots and kettles, bits of furniture, and children peeping through these objects. Some were babies born on the road, the women were barefoot, clothed in dirty rags and smelt so bad that had they not been smoking the entire time, I would have been afraid of being infected by them.

After a noble-looking advance guard headed by General J-y B-n⁴⁸ headed this terrible group on horseback, the other general, clothed in blue cloaks, and Hessians, Waldeckers, Brunswickers and Auspachers, etc. followed on.⁴⁹ The Hessian General gave us a polite bow as they passed; not so the British – their baggage wagon was pulled by half-starved horses. But in the rear was a fine and noble-looking guard of brave and victorious American yeomanry, who had brought these sons of slavery to justice; the whole procession was closed by Yankees in wagons pulled by fat oxen. The generals and other officers are staying at Bradishes.⁵⁰ The privates trudged up to the hills and we thought they were to stay there, but what a surprise we found in the morning when we found the streets full of the disagreeable creatures! How mortifying is this? They demand our lovely homes and colleges for their

⁴⁷ George III was also the King of Hanover in Germany and was able to use his alliances and English wealth to secure support among the German rulers and mercenary forces, such as those of the Prince of Hesse-Cassel and the Duke of Brunswick.

⁴⁸ I take this to be General Burgoyne, who, after his defeat at Saratoga, was taken, along with the troops from Brunswick, into quarters at Cambridge.

⁴⁹ Troops from the German armies allied to George III.

⁵⁰ A prominent family of Cambridge.

accommodation. Did the brave General Gates ever mean this? Did our legislature ever intend that the military should outrank the civilian? Is this not rather unkind to the almost ruined Cambridge? The army seems almost let loose upon us and time will only tell of the consequences.

Some kind people say we should not see them as prisoners as they are people of high rank. Perhaps we should not see them as enemies. I think the distinction will soon be lost. It is surprising that our generals and colonels should insist that the best university in America should stop its work and give way so that these people can be accommodated there, and we poor, oppressed people should seek safety in the woods in a piercing winter. Where is the stern virtue of an A⁵¹ who opposed such intrusions in former days? Who is there to plead our cause? Pity it is that our assembly had not sorted this out before adjourning. It will be hard to bring them into line after they have enjoyed such freedom. Perhaps you will see some of them at Plymouth. For my part, I think that insults, feminine and a train of evils is in sight.

General Burgoyne dined in Boston on Saturday with General H-h.⁵² He rode through the town down Court Street and through the main road, and on his return walked to Charleston Ferry followed by as many spectators as if he was a Pope,⁵³ and commented to an officer with him on the decent behaviour of the townsfolk, saying that if he had been taking prisoners through London, not all the King's soldiers could have stopped insults from happening. He also acknowledged that Lincoln and Arnold were great generals.⁵⁴ It is said that we shall have 7,000 in the areas in and around Cambridge, more than the town's inhabitants. 250 cords⁵⁵ of wood is not enough to supply them all for a week; think of our distress. It now costs £5.10⁵⁶ a cord and there is little to buy. I never thought I could sleep surrounded by enemies, but we have become used to difficult things.

⁵¹ This I take to refer to John Adams and the earlier complaints of the colonists in the run-up to the Revolution over the quartering of soldiers in the war with the French.

⁵² General Heath of Massachusetts; he was in charge of Burgoyne after the surrender at Saratoga.

⁵³ Given the Puritan origins of these families and the general popularity of strict forms of Protestantism in New England, this is far from a compliment. Instead, Winthrop is comparing him to another great 'tyrant' in her eyes.

⁵⁴ High-ranking generals in the Continental American Army. Arnold would later marry a British spy and become known as a traitor to America for his role as a double agent for the British in 1780.

⁵⁵ A cord is a unit of measuring firewood in North America; it corresponds to approximately 3.6 cubic metres of wood.

⁵⁶ A project from the University of Stockholm calculates this as equivalent to approximately \$945.65 in 2015 (<http://www.historicalstatistics.org/Currencyconverter.html>).

While writing this, an excited neighbour has come in to tell us that General How has surrendered to General Washington; can we believe this has happened? The events of battles are so uncertain that we can't believe anything until confirmed by the best authorities.

My husband joins me in sending his best wishes to Colonel Warren and yourself, as you are probably tired of my chit-chat.

Yours,

Cambridge, 11 November 1777

P.S. General Burgoyne has repeatedly said he thought it was impossible that Britain should beat America; he therefore wished an unbreakable union had been created and that he could soon go home and avoid more trouble.

If you like anecdotes I will give you another.

When General Phillips was travelling through the back of Albany,⁵⁷ where it is very rocky and barren, he was astonished that they should cross the Atlantic and go to such trouble to conquer a country that was not worth keeping. When they came to the fertile Connecticut River, General Whipple said that this is what they were fighting for and he replied that this country was worth a ten-year war.

We hear no parole.⁵⁸

Signed Mrs Winthrop

Questions to consider

1. 'The Assemblies and Continental Congress had clearly abandoned the early spirit of the Revolution.' How far can this statement be supported and challenged by this source?
2. Is there any evidence of General Burgoyne being disingenuous in his dealings with the Americans in this source?

⁵⁷ Part of upstate New York, on the mainland rather than on Long Island and Manhattan, where the city is located.

⁵⁸ An agreement between captured soldiers and their hosts: they must hand over their weapons and live within any agreed rules until their commanding officers and home countries pay or arrange for their release. For officers, this was usually an agreement to do no harm or attempt to escape in return for living in good quarters with food and entertainment and a good degree of freedom to move around.

3. What can we learn about the sources of Hannah's information? How does she view her sources?
4. How far have Hannah's attitudes towards the war, revolution, the British and the American command changed by this point?

Letter 10: Mercy Otis Warren to Hannah Winthrop, 6 February 1789, 'Little to do with politics'

Original letter and transcription: <http://www.masshist.org/database/3379>

Plymouth, Feb 1789

Why have I not heard from my dear Mrs Winthrop? I have had only one short letter all winter. Had I anything worth writing these past three months,⁵⁹ you would have had frequent letters from me, but we are quiet and passive. We have little to do with either politics, the powerful or the world.⁶⁰ Do write us something in the narrative style, but if you do not feel like doing this, simply write to me of yourself.

I find the longer I don't write, the harder it is to do so, and if my friends don't call on me too, I shall soon forget the art of letter writing. Perhaps some would say that it is time to do so, as I have ruined enough paper. Politics is out of the question; all future writing should be harmless.

Tell the Major to write to us and let us know how the wind is blowing in the capital, and whether he has become a staunch and decided Federalist – if not, he is to be pitied for his hard-headedness.⁶¹ I hope as soon as the roads are cleared and the weather better, you will soon visit us with either of your sons who would like to come.

Yours affectionately

M Warren

Questions to consider

1. How have the positions of the two women changed from the start of the Revolution and this collection?
2. Why did the Federalists have such an appeal among people such as the Warrens?

⁵⁹ Hannah did not live long after this letter and died in 1790.

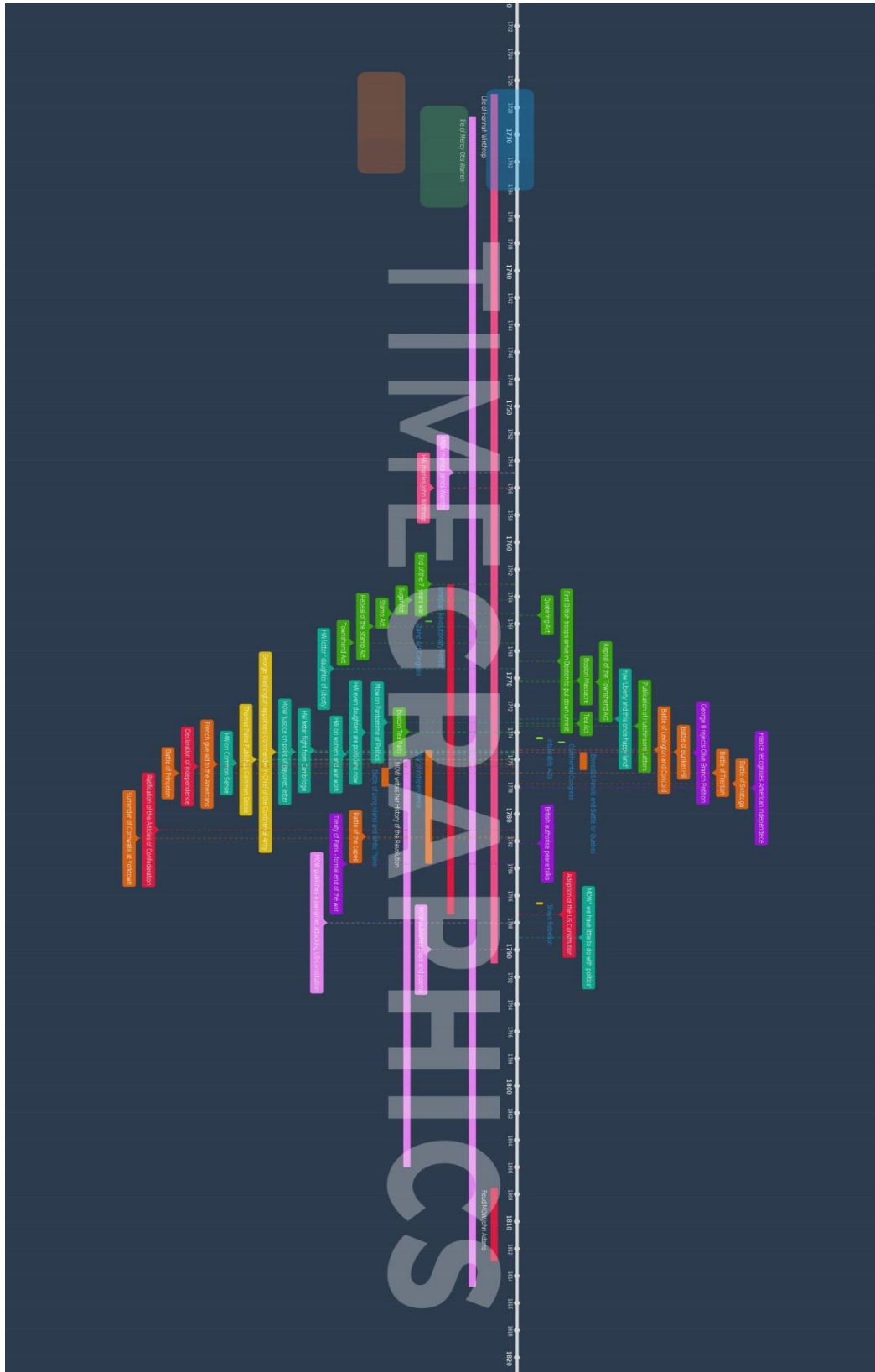
⁶⁰ By this point, one of Mercy's sons had died after a long battle with mental and physical health, and the Warrens had lost much of the respect they had gained during the Revolution.

⁶¹ Mercy had also become a Federalist and a vocal opponent of the Constitution by this period, and the year before had written a pamphlet attacking it. This goes some way to explaining the fact that they were no longer popular among the politicians of the New Republic.

3. Why would Mercy now view her earlier writing as harmful and a waste of paper when it was all in aid of the Revolution?

Timeline of Mercy Otis Warren, Hannah Winthrop, their correspondence and the American Revolution

<https://time.graphics/line/106490>



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