Hello, my name is Jared Berg, a freshman at the College of Wooster and today I will be presenting my podcast entitled “Revolutionary Women: Femininity in the Age of American Independence.” Within this segment, I will be discussing the roles women played during the American Revolution and how these roles correlated to social expectations. The American Revolution is a particularly interesting time period to study women’s roles as a highly radical event positioned immediately prior to the dawn of first wave feminism. Throughout this podcast I will illustrate that women played a vital role throughout the Revolutionary War, producing a unique female experience. Even those women who were not involved in the war effort found their day-to-day experience as females different from the traditional. Despite this, social attitudes towards women remained relatively unchanged.

The Revolutionary War was a period of political upheaval previously unseen in colonial society that provided an opportunity for women to assume roles not traditionally considered feminine. The chief example of this are instances of women assuming proactive roles in the military by either disguising themselves as soldiers or gathering information as spies. Both of these roles reflect heavily on the social ideas of gender at the time. Obviously, those women who disguised themselves in order to join the military effort clearly transgressed restrictions and reflect that the military was considered, without exceptions, purely a masculine endeavor.¹ This concept is reinforced by the experience of perhaps the most famous female soldier, Deborah Sampson, who served a significant amount of time in the Continental Army disguised as a man.

¹ Hiltner, Judith “‘The Example of Our Heroine’: Deborah Sampson and the Legacy of Herman Mann’s The Female Review” American Studies, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Spring, 2000), pp. 93-113
On the other hand, women who were employed as spies utilized the expectations of their gender, as tacticians and soldiers did not expect a female, traditionally considered innocent, to participate in such ventures. By rejecting these traditional ideals, women involved in the war effort embraced their opportunity to transgress social expectations and in the process aid the cause for independence.

Even those women who were not involved in the war effort had a unique experience in the Revolutionary Age. War-time culture provided opportunities for women to embrace the spirit of social transgression. This point brings forth one of the Revolutionary War’s most memorable tales. The following is taken from a letter from Abigail Adams to her husband, “There has been much rout and Noise in the Town for several weeks. Some Stores had been opend by a number of people and the Coffe and Sugar carried into the Market and dealt out by pounds. It was rumourd that an eminent, wealthy, stingy Merchant (who is a Batchelor) had a Hogshead of Coffe in his Store which he refused to sell to the committee under 6 shillings per pound. A Number of Females some say a hundred, some say more assembled with a cart and trucks, marchd down to the Ware House and demanded the keys, which he refused to deliver, upon which one of them seazd him by his Neck and tossd him into the cart. Upon his finding no Quarter he deliverd the keys, when they tipd up the cart and dischargd him, then opend the Warehouse, Hoisted out the Coffe themselves, put it into the trucks and drove off. It was reported that he had a Spanking among them, but this I believe was not true. A large concourse of Men stood amazd silent Spectators of the whole transaction.”

spawned a new type of female experience. This incidence of female aggression is just one example of the loosening of restrictive female roles during the Revolution. Yet, as we can tell, the males stand frozen in surprise, indicative of the indignation felt by this patriarchal society towards this new female presence.

Despite the active roles assumed by many women throughout the American Revolution, the end of the war signaled a resurgence in traditional thinking regarding gender. Without the fluidity of a culture in flux, women were subverted to their previous roles. This sentiment is echoed by Jan Lewis in her journal article, “Women and the American Revolution” when she laments that the independent American government rested upon the exclusion of women, and questions if, “The Revolution was really a revolution...or merely a change of regime.” Abigail Adams expressed similar sentiments to her husband Jon Adams during his time at the Continental Congress by stressing the importance of female rights in the new proposed American republic. This famous quip to “Remember the ladies” stands as a testament to the overall disregard towards the welfare of women typical of the time period. Overall, this stagnation in progressive thinking regarding gender proves that despite their role in gaining American independence, female interests were still considered extraneous to the political realm and social thinking remained entrenched in a traditional mindset.

Thanks for listening today, I hope this podcast helped you reach a better understanding of the female perspective during the American Revolution. The manner in which women progressed

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socially through the Revolutionary Age only to be reverted to a traditional status is one dark spot
on a watershed moment in American history.