Lesson Title:

Author: Sarah Whelan  Grade Level: Middle
School: George Washington  Time Estimated: 2-3 days

Overview:
This lesson is part of a unit of study on life in Colonial America. During this unit, students explore the reasons colonial settlements were created, regional differences among the colonies, and aspects of life for diverse groups of colonial Americans. This lesson focuses on women’s roles in the colonies, as well as some of the differences between New England colonies and Mid-Atlantic and Southern colonies. This lesson would fit best in the later part of the unit, after students have gotten a solid understanding of the religious and economic conditions that shaped the development of the 13 colonies, including a basic understanding of the economic systems of indentured servitude and slavery. With this basis of knowledge, students will be able to make connections to what they learn in this lesson. In this lesson, students will use primary source documents, as well as secondary sources, to study and interpret the role of women in Colonial America.

Historical Background:
While it is frequently assumed that all women worked inside the home during the colonial period, there really is a much more complex picture to be created of women during that time. Though there are common themes that united women’s experiences, there was also a broad array of individual stories and situations.

The 13 Anglo-American colonies were established for diverse reasons, both economic and religious. Each colony had its own charter and, in addition to British law, each created its own rules, including rules that had an impact on the status of women. In the colonies, women basically had no legal or political standing. Rules of coverture (or “femme covert”) applied, meaning that a woman’s entity was subsumed by a man’s: first her father and then most likely her husband. Therefore, she was not allowed to own property, keep her own wages, sign contracts, or bring lawsuits. In the colonies, the male population far outweighed the female population, so there were very few single women. Divorce was rare, though it did occur more in the Puritan colonies of Massachusetts and Connecticut. The fault was generally assumed to be the woman’s, and the children were given to the father. Violence against women was even sanctioned by the “rule of thumb”: a man was allowed to beat his wife, as long as he didn’t use anything wider than his thumb.

Despite these legal impediments, women did find opportunities to work and contribute to their families and communities. Widows gained the most legal opportunities, as they were allowed to act in their husband’s stead. The rule of
jointure also protected the property that women brought into a marriage. The reality of individual economic circumstances provided women with many more opportunities than they would appear to have on paper. Although not much wage work was available to women in the colonies, women contributed to the economic output of their families through their domestic labor. Women were often involved with social and economic exchange beyond their own households and farms, taking responsibility for certain tasks and trades. (Ulrich, 76). In many cases, this “invisible economy” was managed by women as housewives traded goods and labor, employed their own and their neighbors’ daughters, and kept records of accounts independently of their husbands. (Ulrich, 84).

In addition to these economic systems, women’s status improved with both the Enlightenment and the American Revolution. The Enlightenment put forth a more favorable view of women and brought about increased literacy and access to reading material. The American Revolution brought about appeals to women to participate and cooperate, from boycotting British goods to taking on new roles so that men could go fight. These sacrifices and contributions led to a greater respect and acknowledgement of women’s roles.

Of course, not all women in the colonies were free. Thousands of women were brought to the colonies as indentured servants and had to earn there freedom with years of hard work. Many thousands more were brought against their will from Africa and forced to live their lives enslaved. They faced particular challenges, not only because of their lack of freedom, but also the constant threat of being separated from their family members.

Women’s role in colonial history is frequently boiled down in our textbooks to a paragraph or two that serves as a side note to the more male-dominated themes of the colonial era, personified in gigantic figures like Patrick Henry, Sam Adams, and Paul Revere. By looking at stories of individual women, we can add layers that help us form a more multi-dimensional understanding of women during this period.

Objectives:
Students will:
- Interpret and analyze primary documents
- Identify types of work performed by women in Colonial America
- Describe colonial life in New England, Mid-Atlantic, and Southern colonies
- Compare the lives of various social groups, including women, indentured servants, slaves, commoners, and the upper class.
- Work effectively with a partner to analyze documents
- Demonstrate ability to write from a historical perspective

Standards of Learning: United States History to 1877

Skills:
USI.1: Students will develop skills for historical and geographical analysis,
including the ability to:
a) identify and interpret primary and secondary source documents
d) interpret ideas and events from different historical perspectives
e) evaluate and discuss issues orally and in writing

**Content:**
USI.5: Students will demonstrate knowledge of factors that shaped colonial America by:
b) comparing and contrasting life in the New England, Mid-Atlantic, and Southern colonies, with emphasis on how people interacted with their environment
c) describing colonial life in America from the perspectives of large landowners, common farmers, artisans, women, indentured servants, and slaves.

**Major Understanding:**
By examining the stories of individual women in colonial America, students will understand the complex nature of the lives and relationships of women during the colonial period