Module 03: A Revolution for Whom?

Context

Men of Property

Sometime around 1843, a young man named Mellen Chamberlain interviewed Levi Preston, an aging veteran of the American Revolution. Then ninety-one years old, Preston had been in his early twenties in 1775 when British soldiers marched out of Boston to search for arms and rebels in nearby Concord, Massachusetts. "What made you go to the Concord Fight?" Chamberlain wanted to know. "Young man," replied Preston, "what we meant in going for those Redcoats was this: we had always governed ourselves and we always meant to." For Levi Preston, it was just that simple. As a white, Christian man of property, he had controlled his own life before the Revolution, and he had no intention of allowing Parliament or British soldiers to change it.

For men like Levi Preston, the American Revolution confirmed their status as autonomous citizens of an enlightened state. In the decades preceding the Revolution, they enjoyed political, social, and economic autonomy, though it was often based on custom rather than law. The Revolution changed everything by replacing the unwritten British constitution, and its traditional liberties, with written constitutions explicitly stating the rights men like Preston had long enjoyed. For them, the Revolution brought a confirmation of their liberty.

Women and Minorities

What about the many Americans who were not white, Christian men of property? What did the Revolution bring them? Before the Revolution, non-whites, women, non-Christians, and poor men enjoyed far fewer rights than white, Christian men of property, such as Levi Preston. Throughout the thirteen colonies that later became the United States, social and political rights were often restricted on the basis of race, gender, class, or religion.

Slavery in the Colonies

On the eve of the American Revolution, approximately twenty percent of the American population was black. The vast majority of African Americans, of course, were slaves. Slavery existed in all thirteen colonies and was most common in the South. Longer growing seasons there allowed farmers to raise labor-intensive crops, such as tobacco and rice, and seemed to justify the use of slaves by earning

enough to pay for them. Slaves made up nearly forty percent of the southern colonies' total population and more than sixty percent of South Carolina's population. But northerners also found uses for slaves in their cities, homes, and industries. In fact, in sheer numbers, New York had more slaves than Georgia until after the Revolution.

The Rights of Slaves

Slaves had no rights. Their owners might grant them various privileges, such as days off or access to garden plots, but they could revoke such rights at any time. Legally, slaves could hold no property of their own. Their time and the fruits of their labor belonged to their owners. Their conjugal unions were not legal marriages and could be broken at any time. They and their children could be bought, sold, conveyed in wills, or used to pay debts, like any other property. Owners could also beat, rape, torture, and even kill their slaves with complete impunity.

Free Blacks

Free blacks occupied a perilous middle ground between freedom and slavery. In general, their rights to property were fairly secure. Free blacks could usually buy and sell both real estate and personal property, including slaves, though in some cases their rights were hedged with restrictions. Boston, for example, forbade free blacks to own pigs, while Connecticut barred them from holding land in any town without the town government's permission. Despite rights to property, however, free blacks were treated as second-class citizens. They often needed passes to travel and were frequently forbidden to own firearms. They were tried by courts, but could not serve on juries. Free blacks were also taxed like other citizens, but usually denied the right to vote.

Women's Rights

Women enjoyed few rights in Anglo-America. This was especially true of married women, who in many ways ceased to exist as legal or public beings. Married women had no authority to sign contracts. Any real estate she owned before getting married became her husband's to manage, and any personal property she owned became her husband's outright. Unmarried, adult women at least retained their property rights. They could buy and sell both real estate and personal property, execute contracts, and sue or be sued over debts, and they often ran businesses, such as taverns or shops. Unmarried, adult women also paid taxes on

the property they owned. Yet even as tax-payers, woman never enjoyed political rights in Anglo-America. No colony allowed them to vote, hold political office, or serve on a jury.

Women in Public and Private Spheres

Colonial women often enjoyed more rights within private spheres, such as among family or in church, than they did in public spheres, although here, too, they were generally considered subordinate to men. Husbands acted as the head of the house; as such, they were expected to provide for their wives' emotional as well as material needs. In addition, husbands retained the right to "correct" — within limits — those in their charge, which included their wives. In most colonies, however, marriage was for life. Only in the Puritan colonies, where marriage was a civil institution rather than a sacrament, could women divorce husbands who were cruel or deserted them. Men also dominated most churches in the colonies. Only among the Quakers and some of the smaller Pietist groups, such as the Moravians, did women exercise spiritual power in Anglo-America.

Wealth and the Right to Vote

Though not as hierarchical as England itself, Anglo-America was far from democratic. Wealth brought power in the colonies, which left poor men with little political or social clout. Political power was directly linked to wealth. Each colony wanted its voters to be "independent," by which they meant free of other men's economic control. Most colonies, therefore, required men to own land (called a freehold) or other valuable assets, such as houses or businesses, in order to vote, although a few granted the vote to men with lifetime leases rather than freeholds. No one knows for sure what percentage of the population met this test. It was certainly easier to vote in the colonies than it was in England, but most historians estimate that only about three-fourths of adult white males in colonial America owned enough property to vote. In addition, holding office usually required even more wealth. Although few laws required it, Anglo-Americans expected wealthy men to dominate elected office. In Virginia, for example, law permitted any adult freeholder to serve in the House of Burgesses. In the late colonial era, however, those elected to the House were usually three or four times wealthier than the average freeholder.

Wealth and Social Standing

One's social status was also linked to wealth, or to the trappings of wealth. How one dressed, spoke, or behaved in public — all of which were often tied to wealth — played a major role in how one was treated. Colonial Americans expected to defer to their betters, just as the English did. In England, "the better sort" were identified by a combination of wealth and birth; ancient families might retain prestige long after their money had run out. But in America, it was harder to identify a gentleman by his lineage, so money was often the only measure of social standing. Money also signified one's religious standing in many colonial communities. Among Anglicans, only wealthy men served on the vestries that governed church affairs. In Puritan colonies, where individual congregations exercised more religious authority, only wealthy men served as deacons or elders. Throughout the colonies, many churches based seating on the individual's wealth; the wealthier one was, the nearer to God.

Religious Freedom?

One of the great myths of American history is that English colonists came to America for religious freedom. While many did come to the New World to practice their own religion freely, few believed that others should be allowed that privilege. Among the thirteen colonies that became the United States, only Rhode Island granted its citizens the right to attend (or not attend) the church of their choice. Most of the other colonies had state churches. Each resident of the colony, whatever their personal beliefs, was required to pay taxes in support of the state church and to attend its services. Many colonial governments also outlawed meetings of other churches and threatened to arrest their ministers and members. Seventeenth-century Massachusetts even executed several Quakers who had returned to the colony after being banished because of their religion. By the end of the colonial period, official churches had begun to lose some of their power, and several colonies expressed de facto tolerance of other Protestant religions. This did not, however, free their members from paying taxes to support the official faith; it simply allowed them to establish their own churches and conduct their own services. Even limited freedom of worship was usually denied to Catholics and Jews.

Religion and Political Rights

The right to worship was only one aspect of religious freedom. Politics and religion were closely linked in the seventeenth century, and political rights often depended

on one's faith. In England, for example, few people believed that Catholics or Jews could be loyal citizens. Jews were said to hate all Christians and to be plotting their destruction, while Catholics were widely suspected of treason because the Pope and Catholic powers such as Spain had declared their intention to destroy the heretical Church of England. Most English colonists brought these same attitudes to America. Catholics and Jews were not only denied the right to worship in most colonies; they were denied their political rights in every colony. Even Maryland, which had originally been founded by Catholics, restricted voting and office-holding to Protestants in the decades preceding the American Revolution.