HIST 225 Paper Essay

When we picture the American Revolution, we usually think about soldiers in uniform, muskets in hand, fighting battles at Lexington, Saratoga, and Yorktown. We remember names like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and imagine stirring speeches about liberty and independence. But for many colonists, the Revolution wasn’t experienced through grand political debates or military campaigns — it actually happened inside their homes. It unfolded in the quiet, everyday struggles of people who had to adapt to war’s uncertainty. For women especially, the Revolution upended their lives and forced them to take on roles they might never have imagined. Two women in particular, Mary Silliman of Connecticut and Catherine Van Cortlandt of New York, offer powerful glimpses into what this looked like.

Mary’s story, told through the film Mary Silliman’s War, shows a Patriot woman stepping into leadership when her husband was captured. Catherine’s story, preserved through her “Secret Correspondence of a Loyalist Wife,” shows the lonely, risky experience of a Loyalist woman surrounded by Patriot sentiment. Looking at their lives side by side reveals not just how different their experiences were, but also the surprising ways they overlap. Together, their stories make it clear that the Revolution wasn’t just a war fought by men on battlefields — it was also a social and domestic struggle that tested the endurance of women on both sides.

Mary Silliman’s life changed dramatically in 1779 when her husband, Gold Selleck Silliman, a militia general and prominent Patriot figure, was captured by Loyalist raiders. His absence didn’t just create emotional pain; it threw her entire world into disarray. Suddenly, Mary had to manage the family farm, oversee legal and financial affairs, raise children, and even navigate political negotiations to secure his release — all during wartime. The film Mary Silliman’s War makes this reality vivid. Fairfield, Connecticut, where the Silliman’s lived, was a community split by the Revolution. Patriots and Loyalists lived side by side, and tensions often flared into open hostility. This wasn’t a distant, abstract political division; it played out in neighborhoods, churches, and families. Mary had to operate within this fractured community, often taking on responsibilities typically reserved for men.

One of the most striking things about Mary’s story is how she rises to the occasion. Instead of simply waiting for news from the battlefield, she steps into an active leadership role. She manages the estate’s affairs with competence and determination, coordinating work, dealing with legal documents, and engaging in negotiations with Patriot and Loyalist intermediaries to secure her husband’s release. For an 18th-century woman, these were extraordinary responsibilities. Her experience shows how war blurred the lines between the domestic and public spheres. Women like Mary didn’t suddenly gain political rights, but necessity pulled them into roles that indirectly shaped the political landscape. In many ways, Mary’s efforts on the home front were just as crucial as soldiers’ efforts on the battlefield.

Faith plays a central role in Mary’s resilience. The film repeatedly shows her turning to prayer, Scripture, and religious reflection. Religion was not just a private comfort for her — it shaped how she understood her situation. She believed her family’s sacrifices contributed to a righteous cause. Many colonial women interpreted wartime suffering through a religious lens, seeing it as part of divine providence. For Mary, this spiritual framework gave her strength to persevere through uncertainty, destruction (like the burning of Fairfield by British forces), and personal fear. Her story reflects the broader pattern of Patriot women who rooted their endurance in both practical action and deep faith.

While Mary’s story plays out in the relatively open world of Patriot politics and community affairs, Catherine Van Cortlandt’s experience was shaped by secrecy and isolation. Married to Pierre Van Cortlandt Jr., a Loyalist in New York, Catherine was surrounded by Patriots who viewed Loyalists as traitors. Her letters — written secretly and at great personal risk — reveal a life lived under constant surveillance and fear. She could not openly express her political beliefs, and her social ties were strained or severed by her family’s Loyalism.

Like Mary, Catherine endured the absence of her husband during the war. But her emotional burden was compounded by the hostility of neighbors and the loss of property and economic security. Many Loyalist families faced confiscation of their estates, exile, or mob violence. Catherine’s letters describe the difficulty of maintaining a household under these conditions, without community support. While Mary could lean on her Patriot community and religious network, Catherine had to navigate her situation almost entirely alone. Her story shows the personal costs of being on the “losing” side of the Revolution — costs that were often borne most heavily by women left behind when their husbands fled, were arrested, or joined Loyalist military units.

Catherine’s loyalty to the Crown was not simply political; it was moral and personal. Many Loyalists believed that loyalty to the king represented stability, law, and order in a time of chaos. Just as Mary interpreted her actions through the lens of religious duty to a righteous cause, Catherine viewed her loyalty as an expression of moral fidelity to an established authority. This parallel highlights how both women, though on opposite sides, relied on deeply held beliefs to make sense of their situations and to find strength.

At first glance, Mary Silliman and Catherine Van Cortlandt couldn’t be more different. One was a Patriot at the center of community and political action; the other, a Loyalist living quietly in fear. But when we look more closely, their experiences share striking similarities. Both endured the absence of their husbands. Both took on heavy household and community responsibilities. Both lived with constant uncertainty and fear, relying on faith or moral conviction to sustain them. The Revolution thrust both women into roles that blurred the boundaries between private life and public responsibility.

The differences, though, are just as revealing. Mary’s hardships were public and political. She had a degree of authority as the wife of a Patriot leader, and her actions were recognized within her community. Catherine’s struggles were hidden. She had to be cautious in everything she said or did, aware that a wrong word could bring retaliation. Mary represented the Patriot majority; Catherine lived as part of a marginalized minority. These contrasting experiences reflect the polarizing nature of the Revolution, where political allegiance could shape every aspect of a person’s life.

The experiences of Mary and Catherine fit into a broader story of how the Revolution transformed women’s roles across the colonies. Patriot women organized boycotts of British goods, managed farms and businesses while men were away, and sometimes followed the Continental Army as camp followers, cooking, cleaning, and nursing soldiers. Loyalist women often faced exile, the confiscation of property, and social ostracism. In both groups, women developed new forms of resilience and authority. They didn’t suddenly gain equal political rights, but their responsibilities expanded dramatically. Their letters, diaries, and stories show how they became crucial actors in sustaining families, communities, and political causes.

In many ways, the Revolution laid groundwork for later conversations about women’s roles in society. By managing farms, handling business affairs, and engaging indirectly in political struggles, women demonstrated their capacity to lead and adapt in crisis. Their contributions were often overlooked by the men who wrote the founding documents, but they were essential to the Revolution’s survival.

Mary Silliman and Catherine Van Cortlandt remind us that the American Revolution wasn’t only fought with muskets and declarations — it was lived out in kitchens, farms, letters, and prayers. Mary’s story shows the strength of Patriot women who stepped into public roles, driven by faith and community responsibility. Catherine’s story shows the quiet endurance of Loyalist women who maintained their beliefs under threat and isolation. Their experiences, though different, intersect in their resilience, adaptability, and importance.

By examining their lives, we gain a richer understanding of the Revolution as both a political and domestic struggle. Women were not bystanders; they were active participants in holding their families and communities together. Their sacrifices and efforts, though often invisible in traditional narratives, were crucial to the era’s history. Independence may have been declared by men in Philadelphia, but it was also upheld by women like Mary and Catherine, who bore the weight of war at home and showed that courage takes many forms.

This work complies with the JMU Honor Code.  
– Oscar Berrigan