

America's Founding to Now: Gendered Republicanism

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June 30, 2026

The 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence creates an opportunity to dive deeper into how a nation supposedly established on the principle of “universal equality” created a political order excluding women, while simultaneously assigning them duties framed as civic necessity. The founders understood that democracy – direct rule by all the people – “required such Spartan, self-denying virtue on the part of all the people that it was likely to survive only where poverty made upright behavior necessary for the perpetuation of the race” (Bailyn, 1992. p. 52). This central topic would pull direct language from both classical republicanism, which grounded virtue in property ownership, and Protestant Christianity, which found virtue in religion (Bloch, 1987). Civic virtue became a central obsession, and from the earliest days of the republic, women were presented as the nation’s moral backbone -- their conditional political status was represented as an essential tool to help raise the moral citizens that the new republic required. This created an arrangement in the Revolutionary era built upon natural inequality within the patriarchal household. This ideology, backed by patriarchal republicanism, is the structural foundation that allowed gendered civic duty, an embedded theme that requires the subordination of women, which can be traced to today. This paper traces this unresolved tension from the Founding era to the present, using Elizabeth Cady Stanton as the analytical bridge between the republic’s original gendered framework and today’s biblical patriarchal movement. Understanding why arguments against women’s political equality keep recurring – and why women’s subordination is often framed as social necessity – requires understanding what gendered republicanism built 250 years ago.

Part I

The exclusion of women from the political sphere was a conscious choice, not an oversight later noticed, and it is documented in the founding generation's own correspondence. In the spring of 1776, as Congress debated independence, Abigail Adams urged her husband to "Remember the Ladies" in the new code of laws, warning him that "all men would be tyrants if they could" (A. Adams, 1776). John Adams's private reply to her was dismissive in tone -- but when Massachusetts politician James Sullivan separately proposed loosening property qualifications for voting, Adams answered him with real alarm, and it is within this letter, not his reply to Abigail, that contains one of the founding generation's clearest admissions of their thoughts about women’s liberty at the time. Adams warned Sullivan that adjusting the franchise at all was "dangerous," a "fruitful source of controversy and altercation" with no natural stopping point:

"New claims will arise. Women will demand a vote. Lads from 12 to 21 will think their rights not enough attended to, and every man, who has not a farthing, will demand an

equal voice with any other in all acts of state. It tends to confound and destroy all distinctions, and prostrate all ranks, to one common level" (J. Adams, 1776. para 13).

Adams's fear was not that women's exclusion might be an oversight to be corrected later. He was actively advocating for a hierarchical society because he could not logically understand what society would look like if women were included.

At the founding of America, the conditional rights imposed upon women were framed as integral to the public good – positioning female subordination as a civic contribution through the ideology of “Republican Motherhood.” As historian Linda Kerber explains, men defined women’s civic duty within the household and ultimately confined their influence on the moral sphere rather than a political one (Kerber, 1980). Benjamin Rush, a physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence, made the gendered logic of republic virtue very explicit in his 1787 work, *Thoughts Upon Female Education*, where he argued that women required an education, if it was one that served the republic through their domestic roles. “...our ladies should be qualified to a certain degree, by a peculiar and suitable education, to concur in instructing their sons in the principles of liberty and government” (Rush, 1787). Rush argued that women should learn only for their sons to be virtuous citizens. Women were tasked with the responsibility to raise virtuous sons because it was not believed that this could happen through political institutions alone.

To help maintain this social order, the Founders utilized the doctrine of “virtual representation,” a concept inherited from the British constitutional tradition, that held that shared interests could be represented without direct participation. Colonists had famously rejected this doctrine when the British, as Bailyn, historian and author, explains colonists viewed virtual representation as "a mask for political tyranny" because it violated the natural right to personal consent (Bailyn, 1992, p. 170). Yet, this same framework was repurposed to rationalize women's exclusion from the political sphere. Under English common law, a married woman would become a *femme covert*, resulting in her becoming legally invisible in terms of her property and identity, both subsumed into her husband’s. Gordon Wood similarly notes how early Americans equated independence with property ownership and virtue, traits reserved exclusively for economically self-sufficient men (Wood, 1998). The brief, exceptional window during which single property-owning women in New Jersey were permitted to vote — a right exercised until 1807 — demonstrates just how contingent and provisional any extension of political standing to women was. When legislators discovered that women's votes had the potential to alter election outcomes, the right was swiftly revoked (ColumbiaLearn, 2017). The episode reveals that the Revolutionary rhetoric of equal

representation was never intended to apply to women as a class; their occasional inclusion was a structural accident quickly corrected.

Thomas Jefferson, whose Declaration had proclaimed that "all men are created equal" and endowed with unalienable rights, theorized women's domestic confinement as a positive, structural feature of republican society. Writing to a friend, he argued that women's participation in political contests would introduce "depravity of morals and ambiguity of issue" into public life, and that the example of European women meddling in politics was one America should deliberately avoid (Jefferson, 1788). For Jefferson, the republic's health depended on keeping women out of the political sphere — their proper influence was exercised at home, through the moral formation of their families, not through political participation.

"All the world is run politically mad. Men, women, children talk nothing else... But our good ladies, I trust, have been too wise to wrinkle their foreheads with politics. They are contented to soothe and calm the minds of their husbands returning ruled from political debate. They have the good sense to value domestic happiness above all other, and the art to cultivate it beyond all others" (Jefferson, 1788).

This "domestic post" they were bound to, was far from some kind of consolation prize; it was the essential foundation to republican stability. As Mary Beth Norton demonstrates in 'Liberty's Daughters,' the shift toward gendered republicanism was not experienced by contemporary women as a loss of rights, but as an expansion of purpose.

By transforming the household into a 'public' world of political significance, the

Revolutionary era provided women with a 'civic' identity that justified their continued social deference while elevating their domestic labor to a form of national service.

However, this system contained a self-defeating fallacy. By the 1790's, the

"Republican Mother" had to be educated to teach her sons. A mother who could not reason could not teach civic virtue; but a mother trained to reason would eventually apply that reasoning to her own political condition. The same logic that assigned women the responsibility of manufacturing civic capacity for others laid the intellectual foundation for them to eventually demand it for themselves.

The adjective "republican," as Jan Lewis observes, carried a dual inheritance — signifying "not only classical republicanism but also that fusion of civic humanism and evangelical ardor achieved by Americans at the eve of the Revolution" (Lewis, 1987, p. 690). Republican motherhood fused these inheritances into a single domestic role: the virtuous wife and mother who raised virtuous sons for the republic. This framework rested on the assumption that women were appropriately constrained to a "domestic sphere," which they were supposed to deploy for moral instruction rather than political authority (Nash, 1997, p. 3).

Despite the Patriot leaders grounding their arguments for independence in natural rights theory, these principles were only applied to women through extension. However, women still found themselves interpreting their lives through the lens of a Revolutionary — they applied the same concepts that they saw their husbands, sons, and fathers to their own rights. Women were relied upon for the moral foundation of the new nation yet denied the political rights that natural theory seemed to promise. This moral authority, limited to domestic terms, gave women the philosophical tools to question the boundaries of citizenship itself. Yet, if the republic required educated mothers to raise educated sons, then women required education — and education, as Mary Beth Norton observes, opened a "Pandora's Box" that would prove difficult to close (Norton).

This contradiction was not merely theoretical — it was lived. Despite their exclusion from formal political participation, women were far from passive observers of Revolutionary politics. As Barbara Clark Smith has shown, women had participated in street protests and mob actions since at least the late seventeenth century and continued to do so throughout the Revolution (Nash, 1997, p. 19). Women understood that their specific choices — what to purchase, whom to socialize with, whether to honor or break boycotts — carried direct political weight. Historian Carol Berkin describes this as a revolution within the home: women were not fighting on battlefields, but in their domestic decisions they sustained the Revolution's economic and moral infrastructure (Berkin, 2005). Philadelphian Quaker Hannah Callender reflected this growing civic awareness in her 1758 diary, observing that "women can't help interesting themselves in politics" (Bilder, 2022). Their moral authority, though officially domesticated, had become a covert form of civic virtue — and some women recognized the contradiction between their political invisibility and their civic indispensability.

Both the classical republican and Protestant traditions emphasized the value of public virtue — within orthodox Protestantism, it was bestowed by Providence or faith; within classical republicanism, it was obtained through independent property holding and mixed government

(Bloch, 1987). These two influential ideologies provided the foundation for the founding nation to begin relying upon the responsibility of women to manufacture civic capacity.

This intellectual opening was the precise scenario John Adams feared in his 1776 letter to James Sullivan. Adams recognized that altering voter qualifications would invite a "fruitful source of controversy" that would eventually prostrate all social distinctions: "New claims will arise; women will demand a vote; lads from twelve to twenty-one will think their rights not enough attended to; and every man who has not a farthing, will demand an equal voice with any other, in all acts of state" (Adams, 1776. Para 13). This anxiety was compounded by James Madison's arguments in Federalist No. 10 (1787), which contended that the primary purpose of government was to protect the "inequality of property" against the "mischiefs of faction". Madison viewed "pure democracy" as inherently incompatible with personal security or the rights of property, marking the exclusion of those without traditional "independence" as a requirement for the state's survival.

It is precisely this productive anxiety -- the question of *where virtue comes from* -- that republican motherhood answered. Women were assigned responsibility for manufacturing the civic capacity the republic needed but could not generate through its political institutions alone. As the next generation started realizing that the republics "masculine systems" were protected by a barrier stronger than social custom: religious orthodoxy. Elizabeth Cady Stanton ultimately argued that the political exclusion established at the Founding was inextricable linked to the different theological interpretations of female subordination.

Part II

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a central figure in the American women's rights movement and one of the most influential women in the nation at the time, had the privilege of growing up in a prominent family that ensured their daughter had a stronger education than most young women of her time (Salvatore, 2026). One of the basic principles of her thinking was the Enlightenment standard of individual liberty, and she never veered from her belief in the equality of women and men (Dubois, 2026). She engaged the logic of "Republican Motherhood" long before the term was formally theorized by historians, treating it in her work as one of patriarchy's clearest tools of control. Her early work primarily addressed women's exclusion from political life; however, her later writings reveal a significant shift in intellectual framework.

In *Solitude of Self* (1892), Stanton opened by declaring that her subject was "the individuality of each human soul; our Protestant idea, the right of individual conscience and judgment — our republican idea, individual citizenship" (Cady Stanton, 1892). She went on to argue that "the strongest reason for giving woman all the opportunities for higher education, for the full development of her faculties, is the solitude and personal responsibility of one's own life" (Cady Stanton, 1892). This self-reliance, she insisted, was itself dignifying: "Nothing strengthens the judgment and quickens the conscience like individual responsibility. Nothing adds such dignity to character as the recognition of one's self-sovereignty" (Cady Stanton, 1892). Rather than grounding equality in women's social usefulness as wives, mothers, or civic moral agents, Stanton redefines it through a universal condition of individual existence. By this point, she increasingly understood political inequality not as the root problem, but as the outcome of a deeper conceptual structure that defined women as inherently dependent beings.

In the *Declaration of Sentiments* (1848), she famously states that "he has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice" (Cady Stanton, 1848). The document also frames this subordination in explicitly theological terms, accusing men of having "usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and her God" (Cady Stanton, 1848) -- a claim that anticipates, nearly five decades in advance, the direct critique of religious authority she would mount in *The Woman's Bible*. Even within the Founding-era assumption that a male head of household could stand in for the political interests of his wife and dependents, Stanton begins to identify the limits of representation itself, particularly its reliance on relational rather than individual subjecthood.

Republican Motherhood helps clarify this structure. It positioned women as moral intermediaries of the republic, responsible for cultivating civic virtue within the domestic sphere. This framework assumed that political stability depended upon moral hierarchy rather than formal equality. If virtue is produced in the home and the home is gendered, then women are assigned a civic function without being granted political status. In this sense, the political order presupposed a gendered model of the subject in which women were defined through relation rather than autonomy.

Stanton's later writings suggest that this political ontology was reinforced by religious interpretation. In *The Woman's Bible* (1895), she does not treat Genesis as a neutral theological account but as a foundational narrative repeatedly used to justify women's subordination across both church and state. She argues that "the canon and civil law; church and state; priests and

legislators" collectively reinforced the belief that woman was created "of man, and for man" (Cady Stanton, 1895). In this framework, scripture functions not simply as religious doctrine but as a legitimating structure for a preexisting model of gender hierarchy.

Stanton's analysis is most radical in her treatment of Genesis as an ontological text rather than a historical one. Reassessing the Eden narrative, she wrote that "it's amazing that any set of men ever claimed that the dogma of the inferiority of woman is here set forth. The conduct of Eve from the beginning to the end is so superior to that of Adam" (Cady Stanton, 1895). The interpretation of woman as created from man becomes, in her critique, not a description of origin but a justification for structural dependence. Likewise, the association of Eve with moral transgression transforms Genesis into a cultural framework in which women are positioned as epistemically and morally suspect. By linking origin, morality, and hierarchy, these interpretations produce a system in which gender difference becomes social classification.

What makes Stanton's intervention especially significant is her challenge not only to biblical content but to interpretive authority itself. She observes that women themselves had been conscripted into upholding this structure, writing that "so perverted is the religious element in her nature, that with faith and works she is the chief support of the church and clergy; the very powers that make her emancipation impossible" (Cady Stanton, 1895). Genesis thus becomes a site where theological narrative, legal structure, and political exclusion converge, revealing that women's subordination was not merely justified by religion but actively stabilized through control over interpretation.

This helps explain the intensity of the backlash Stanton faced, including her eventual marginalization within the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). At the same time, legal rulings such as *Minor v. Happersett* (1875) reinforced her view that constitutional reform alone could not resolve the problem. The Court held flatly that "the Constitution of the United States does not confer the right of suffrage upon anyone" (*Minor v. Happersett*, 1875), confirming that citizenship did not guarantee suffrage, and closed its opinion by declining any responsibility for reform. This ruling meant that the Supreme Court rejected the idea that the 14th Amendment's definition of citizenship implicitly extended suffrage as a right of citizenship and ruled that women were solely just citizens (Salvatore, 2026). Stanton's later work reframes women's exclusion as rooted not only in law or politics, but in a deeper intellectual structure that defined women as derivative beings. As she put it in *Solitude of*

Self, in the end "each soul must depend wholly on itself" (Cady Stanton, 1892). In doing so, she provides a conceptual bridge between the secular political order of the Founding era and the theological assumptions that underwrote it, revealing that the problem of inequality was ultimately embedded in competing definitions of what it means to be a human subject.

Part III

Stanton's critique of the Republican Motherhood ideology and her analysis of the book of Genesis suggest that gender hierarchy is a recurring pattern of interpretation. Contemporary biblical patriarchy illustrates the endurance of this structure, as theological language once again becomes the medium through which gender asymmetry is rendered natural and divinely sanctioned.

This structure was not absent from the Founding itself -- it simply lost. Loyalist clergyman, Jonathan Boucher, offered an explicitly theological alternative to the natural rights framework of 1776, one in which government was patriarchal by divine design rather than contractual by human consent. Bailyn recounts that Boucher dismissed consent and equality as "particularly loose and dangerous" ideas — illogical, unrealistic, and lacking scriptural sanction. In Boucher's account, political authority traced directly back to the household: "the first father was the first king," and "it was thus that all government originated; and monarchy is its most ancient form" (Bailyn, 1992, pp. 314–319). For Boucher, resistance to authority was not merely imprudent but sinful, since rulers "receive their commission from Heaven" rather than "any supposed consent or suffrage of men" (Bailyn, 1992, pp. 314–319). The Revolution defeated this argument politically, but it did not retire the underlying structure. That structure resurfaces, largely intact, in the contemporary biblical patriarchy movement.

Doug Wilson, pastor of Christ Church in Moscow, Idaho, and the central figure in a network of more than 150 churches under the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC), has built a public ministry around the claim that legitimate political order is patriarchal order. "Every society is theocratic," Wilson told CNN in 2025. "The only question is who's 'Theo'? In Saudi Arabia, Theo is Allah. In a secular democracy, it would be Demos, the people. In a Christian republic, it'd be Christ" (CNN, 2025). Wilson and his fellow pastors have said openly that they would support repealing the Nineteenth Amendment. Jared Longshore, executive pastor at Christ Church in Moscow, explained the reasoning directly: "This is a key in the way that we're thinking about the world itself. So, I believe that the household is a unit, and so the household should have one vote" (CNN, 2025). In CREC congregations, this principle already governs church life -- women do not vote in congregational decisions; men vote on behalf of their households.

This is, functionally, a revival of the household-suffrage logic that Founding-era Americans applied to property and coverture — the assumption Part I traced through virtual representation, in which a male head of household was presumed to carry the political interests of his dependents. What has changed is the justification. Where the Founding generation grounded household representation in property and civil law, Wilson grounds it in theology: the household is a "unit" because God designed it as one, and its vote belongs to its head because headship is a creation ordinance, not a legal convenience. The argument that Stanton identified in 1848 and 1895 -- that dependency is dressed up as design -- reappears here almost without alteration, simply relocated from English common law to Genesis.

More precisely, this is Adams's fear running in reverse. Writing to Sullivan in 1776, Adams warned that opening the franchise at all had no principled stopping point -- that a consistent theory of consent could not logically exclude women, which is exactly why the question had to be kept from being asked at all (J. Adams, 1776). Fortunately, Adams lost that argument in 1920.

Wilson and Longshore are not proposing something new; they are attempting to reclose a door Adams could not hold shut by political theory alone. What changes between 1776 and 2026 is not the goal, rather the tool. Adams tried to stop the "New claims will arise" progression with prudential warnings about controversy and social leveling, and the warnings were not enough to survive a century and a half of pressure. Wilson supplies what Adams's argument lacked: a stopping point that does not depend on consent theory at all, because it claims to precede consent theory entirely.

Dale Partridge, a Reformed pastor and the founder of the ministry Relearn.org, extends this logic from the public household vote into the private act of voting itself. Partridge distinguishes his position — which he calls "biblical patriarchy" — from softer complementarianism precisely on this point: complementarianism treats male and female roles as a matter of gifting, while patriarchy treats male headship as unconditional. He teaches that a wife's submission "as to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:22) extends to deferring to her husband's direction even in how she votes, unless that direction would require her to sin. In November 2024, Partridge stated publicly that wives should align their votes with their husbands' -- a claim that drew sharp criticism for endorsing a wife's electoral judgment being overridden by her husband's. Where Wilson relocates the vote to the household as a unit, Partridge relocates it to the marriage as a hierarchy — the

same conclusion *Minor v. Happersett* reached by constitutional interpretation in 1875, now reached by theological interpretation a century and a half later.

Wilson and Partridge do not invent this reasoning; they draw on an established complementarian infrastructure that locates the justification for female subordination in the same text Stanton spent the final years of her life reinterpreting. John MacArthur, longtime pastor of Grace Community Church, grounds women's submission directly in the Genesis 3 curse, arguing that Adam and Eve's fall produced "tension in the authority submission relationship of husband and wife," with the woman's "desire" to control her husband met by his charge to "rule" over her (MacArthur, n.d.). MacArthur has been still more direct about the stakes of disrupting that order:

"Empowering women makes weak men," he told his congregation in 2019, "and weak men make everybody vulnerable to danger" (Christian Post, 2019). Wayne Grudem reaches the same conclusion through systematic theology rather than sermon rhetoric, arguing from 1 Timothy 2:12 — "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men" — that the Bible does not permit women to serve as pastors or elders (Grudem, n.d.). In each case, the same move Stanton diagnosed in *The Woman's Bible* recurs: a text about origin and fall is read as settling a question of present-day authority, and the reading is treated not as an interpretation but as the text's plain, self-evident meaning.

Part I traced a structural instability built into Republican Motherhood itself: a mother trained to reason in order to raise virtuous sons would eventually turn that same reasoning on her own condition. The complementarian and biblical-patriarchy infrastructure reproduces this instability almost exactly. Women raised inside CREC and comparable homeschool-and-apologetics cultures are trained, often extensively, to defend the system publicly — to argue Genesis, headship, and submission fluently, in much the same way Republican Mothers were trained to instill civic virtue in their sons. Some of the most detailed public critiques of Wilson's own teaching on marriage and sex now come from women who spent years inside his church, trained in exactly this apologetic tradition, before turning it against the institution that taught it to them (see, e.g., the compiled testimony at dougwilsonsays.com). The mechanism Stanton lived through personally -- an education intended to produce a better instrument of the existing order instead produced one of its most capable internal critics -- is not a historical curiosity confined to the 1790s. It truly is a structural feature of any system that requires its subordinates to be articulate enough to transmit its own justifications, and it recurs every time that requirement is imposed again.

What separates the current movement from ordinary complementarianism is its willingness to draw the argument out to its full political conclusion. Pastor Joel Webbon, a self-described

Christian nationalist, has stated that Christian Nationalism opposes women's right to vote, that its adherents want to repeal the Nineteenth Amendment outright, and that under a fully realized Christian nationalist order, women would be represented in government by men who "love" them (Paulson, 2024, summarizing Webbon's remarks on The Standard podcast). This is *Minor v. Happersett*'s holding restated as aspiration rather than history: not merely that suffrage was not, in 1875, a right attached to citizenship, but that it should not be.

The same conclusion also appears without any theological vocabulary at all, which suggests that it simply finds theology to be one especially durable vehicle. In his 2009 essay "The Education of a Libertarian," venture capitalist Peter Thiel wrote that "since 1920, the vast increase in welfare beneficiaries and the extension of the franchise to women — two constituencies that are notoriously tough for libertarians — have rendered the notion of 'capitalist democracy' into an oxymoron," concluding that "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible" (Thiel, 2009). Thiel later characterized the remark as a "commonplace statistical observation about voting patterns" rather than an argument against women's suffrage as such. Whatever his intent, the structure of the claim is identical to Wilson's and Webbon's: an expansion of the franchise is treated as the cause of a decline in the political order's proper function, and the pre-1920 arrangement is implicitly recovered as the baseline of legitimacy. Where Boucher and Wilson locate that legitimacy in divine design, Thiel locates it in market function — but in both cases, women's political inclusion is the variable blamed for the system's departure from an idealized prior state.

This is, in fact, Madison's argument from *Federalist* No. 10, restated in market rather than constitutional language. Madison's case for representative government over "pure democracy" rested on protecting a propertied minority from a hostile majority, since "the various and unequal distribution of property" was, in his account, the "most common and durable source of factions" (Madison, 1787; see Part I). Thiel's complaint that an expanded electorate renders "capitalist democracy" "an oxymoron" has the identical shape: a franchise broad enough to include people without an existing stake in property arrangements is treated as inherently destabilizing to those arrangements. Madison worried about propertyless men; Thiel names women and "welfare beneficiaries" explicitly; both treat the size of the electorate itself, independent of any specific policy it might produce, as the variable that determines whether property is safe. Bloch's observation about the Founding — that virtue was articulated in two registers, one grounded in property and one in Protestant faith (Bloch, 1987; see Part I) — describes this pairing exactly. Thiel supplies the property register; Wilson, Partridge, and Webbon supply the Protestant one. Both registers were available at the Founding, and both are still doing the same work now.

None of this is confined to a handful of prominent pastors and commentators.

Sociologists Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, using a national random sample of American adults, found that Christian nationalism is the strongest predictor of holding a traditionalist gender ideology, a relationship that holds even after controlling for a wide range of political and religious characteristics, and that persists across religious traditions — including denominations that are otherwise comparatively egalitarian on gender (Whitehead & Perry, 2019). In a related study fielded weeks before the 2020 election, Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs found that Christian nationalism was the leading predictor of Americans denying that voter suppression is a real problem, believing voter fraud to be widespread, and supporting measures — such as civics tests — that would disenfranchise voters deemed insufficiently "worthy" (Perry, Whitehead, & Grubbs, 2022). That second study is about restricting the franchise generally rather than reversing women's suffrage specifically, but together the two studies indicate that Wilson's, Partridge's, and Webbon's positions are not idiosyncratic. They sit atop a documented ideological current in which gender traditionalism and support for a narrower, "worthiness"-based franchise move together.

The word "worthy" is not incidental, nor is it new. It is the same sorting logic Jefferson used in 1816 when he listed whom a "pure democracy" would necessarily exclude from its deliberations: infants, women, and the enslaved, grouped together as people who lacked, in his account, sufficient standing or "will" to be trusted with self-government (Jefferson to Kercheval, 1816; see Part I). Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs are not describing a new idea when they find contemporary support for civics-test disenfranchisement. They are describing the same taxonomy of political worthiness Jefferson articulated 206 years earlier, now measurable at scale in survey data rather than legible only in one statesman's private correspondence.

It would overstate the case to claim that the Founders were closet theocrats and that Wilson's movement is simply their honest heir. Historian, Mark David Hall, has argued at length against the revisionist Christian-nationalist reading of the Founding, contending that the Founders were explicitly not attempting to establish a confessional state (Hall, n.d.). The claim here is not that the Founders were secretly building the theocracy Wilson wants. It is narrower: the Founding generation built a political order that assumed and required gendered dependency, expressed that assumption through the available idiom of natural rights and civil law, and left the door open for a fully theological version of the same assumption (visible even then, in Boucher) to be revived once natural-rights language stopped serving that purpose as reliably. Hall is very likely right that the Founders did not intend a Christian nationalist state. Stanton's insight, and this paper's, is that intent is not always required for the same interpretive structure to recur.

This paper began with a question raised by coincidence of timing: what does it mean that a nation founded on "universal equality" reaches its 250th anniversary having spent nearly the whole of that history litigating whether the phrase ever included women. The answer this paper has argued for is not that the Founders overlooked women, nor that their exclusion was corrected once and settled. It is that the Founding generation built a structure, not a single argument — and structures do not fall when one argument supporting them is defeated. They relocate.

Next, it established that the exclusion was deliberate and that its architects knew it was unstable. Adams, writing to Sullivan, could see that a consistent theory of political consent had no principled place to stop short of including women, and his response was not to refute that logic but to refuse it a hearing -- "dangerous," a "fruitful source of controversy" best left unopened. Bloch's account of Founding-era virtue supplied the two vocabularies available to do that work of refusal: a classical-republican register grounded in property, and a Protestant register grounded in providence. Republican Motherhood turned exclusion into a civic contribution, and in doing so planted the instability that would eventually undo it — a mother educated enough to manufacture virtue in her sons was educated enough to ask why the same virtue could not license her own political standing.

Stanton's trajectory from the Declaration of Sentiments to The Woman's Bible reveals the fact that both the political and religious arguments were never separate. Her 1848 grievance that men had "usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself" already names the theological register Bloch identified in the Founding generation's own vocabulary. By 1895, Stanton had located the deeper mechanism: subordination survives any single defeat because it is sustained by interpretive authority -- the power to decide what a text, a law, or a household means -- rather than by any one text, law, or household in particular. *Minor v. Happersett* confirmed her suspicion that the political register alone could not resolve the problem; the Court could concede her citizenship and still deny that citizenship implied a voice.

Lastly, it demonstrated that Stanton's diagnosis was not specific to her century. When Wilson argues that a household is "a unit" entitled to one vote, he is supplying the stopping point Adams's own logic could never produce, because Adams was still working inside consent theory and Wilson has stepped outside it entirely, into a claim that precedes consent. When Thiel argues that an expanded franchise has made "capitalist democracy" "an oxymoron," he is restating Madison's property register from Federalist No. 10 without needing Madison's name to do it.

Whitehead, Perry, and Grubbs' survey data confirm that neither man is an outlier: gender traditionalism and support for a narrower, "worthier" franchise move together across a broad and measurable segment of the population, not

merely among a handful of prominent pastors and commentators.

Taken together, the three parts describe a single mechanism operating across two hundred and fifty years: a structure that can survive the loss of any one of its justifications because it was never dependent on a single justification to begin with. Coverture fell. The Nineteenth Amendment passed. *Minor v. Happersett* was superseded. None of these defeats dissolved the underlying architecture; each one simply forced the architecture to relocate to whichever register -- legal, scientific, civic, or theological -- could still carry its weight. That the register currently doing the most visible work is explicitly religious should not be read as a return to something premodern. If anything, this highlights how Stanton was right to insist that the fight was never only political. It was always also a fight over who gets to say what a text, a body, or a household means — and that fight does not close simply because one side wins an election, or a courtroom, or an amendment.

This paper has not attempted to trace that mechanism through every register it has occupied. The period between 1920 and the rise of the contemporary Christian-nationalist movement — where the structure very likely persisted in scientific, psychological, and economic vocabularies rather than explicitly theological ones -- falls outside its scope, as does a full accounting of how race and gender were co-constructed within Republican Motherhood specifically, a question Jefferson's own 1816 taxonomy of infants, women, and the enslaved makes clear cannot be set aside indefinitely. Both are natural extensions of the argument made here, not challenges to it. What this paper has tried to establish is narrower and, I think, more durable: that the question Abigail Adams asked her husband in the spring of 1776, and that he could not answer without simply refusing to ask it, is still open. Stanton's answer to it was that no one -- not a husband, not a household, not a church, not a state -- may take upon themselves "the rights, the duties, the responsibilities of another human soul." Two hundred and fifty years after the Declaration, and more than a century after Stanton wrote those words, the argument over whether that is true remains, unfinished, the argument this country is still having with itself.

Resources

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