



SPHERE

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“Love for the Public Good”: The Story of Esther de Berdt Reed

ADAPTED FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL BY CHRISTINA LAROSE

From London to America

Although Esther de Berdt was born in London, England, in 1747, she became one of the most strongly committed American patriots of her time. In 1763, when she was 17 years old, she met and fell in love with Joseph Reed, a law student from New Jersey. After five years of a long-distance courtship by mail, the young couple married and settled in Philadelphia. During the American Revolutionary War, Joseph Reed served as the military secretary to George Washington and as the governor of Pennsylvania. The couple became the parents of six children, and Esther Reed became a strong supporter of the American cause.



“The Sentiments of an American Woman”

In late May 1780, Washington reported to Congress that his troops were in desperate need of supplies, rations, clothing, and pay. At that time, Reed had recently given birth to her sixth child. During this period, women were not encouraged to participate in politics and public life, but she wrote a broadside that was published in 1780 titled “The Sentiments of an American Woman.”

This broadside was printed on a single sheet of paper, front and back. Reed argued that every American woman must actively support the war effort to ensure victory. At the beginning of the broadside, Reed stated that women “aspire to render themselves more really useful” and that women are “born for liberty, disdaining to bear the irons of a tyrannic government.”

Next, she gave many examples of women throughout history who used their strength to help others in times of war. Reed also highlighted women’s love for the public good: “If opinion and manners did not forbid us to march to glory by the same paths as the Men, we should at least equal, and sometimes surpass them in our love for the public good.” Reed urged women to give up luxuries and donate money to the Continental Army, as an “offering of the Ladies.”

A Fundraising Plan

Reed wanted to give women a chance to help the Patriot effort in a way that defied typical gender roles of the era. In the second half of her broadside, she outlined a plan for raising the money needed by the Continental Army. This plan was very detailed and had 11 steps.

Reed also founded and ran the Philadelphia Ladies Association. These women were so dedicated to raising money to support the Continental Army that they went door-to-door requesting donations. Ultimately, they collected donations from more than 1,500 Philadelphia households. Reed reported in a letter to George Washington that the ladies had raised \$300,634. That was the equivalent of about \$7.1 million in today’s money.

Deciding How to Spend the Money

At first, Reed wanted to give the money to each soldier directly. However, George Washington said that the soldiers really needed clothing. He asked Reed and the women to sew linen shirts for the soldiers. Reed told each volunteer to embroider their names into the clothing so the soldiers would remember them. In just three months, the Ladies Association sewed more than 2,000 shirts for soldiers.

Reed's Legacy of Compassion

In July 1780, George Washington wrote a thank-you letter to Reed. He said, "This fresh mark of the patriotism of the Ladies entitles them to the highest applause of their Country." Unfortunately, Reed died of dysentery as the project was being wrapped up in September 1780. She was only 33 years old.

Many women were inspired by Reed. Women organized fundraising drives in Maryland, New Jersey, and Virginia. As in Philadelphia, women in these states adapted their fundraising efforts to meet local conditions. The funds raised from these states were also sent to General Washington.

Because of her tireless efforts, Reed was inducted into the Daughters of Liberty, an all-female association that had been formed in 1765 to protest the Stamp Act and the Townshend Acts. Although Reed was not an American-born citizen, she strongly believed in freedom and the American Revolution. She showed that women could publish political thought, create successful political fundraising organizations, and be important contributors to the Revolutionary War.

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