

Using Images of Women in American History

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In history the quarrels of popes and kings, with wars and pestilences in every page... and hardly any women at all—it is very tiresome.—Jane Austen (1775-1817), *Northanger Abbey*



Jane Austen's fictional character from *Northanger Abbey* expressed Austen's personal woeful admonition of the lack of women written about in history.¹ This problem became a major concern of historians and sociologists who were motivated by the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s.² The civil rights movement launched in the 1950s opened a door for researchers to examine at all sorts of curricular inequities in the educational system, such as race, culture, ethnicity, disability, and gender.

Research on the inclusion of women in textbooks found severe inequalities in the way women were included in text and illustration.³ As men had been the principal writers of United States history since the nation's inception, "herstory" had been forgotten or minimized. After the 1960s, a greater effort was made to include women in U. S. history textbooks, but with only minor success.⁴

The majority of people in the United States have only a rudimentary knowledge of the contributions of women to the events, ideas, and aspirations that drive history. This lack of knowledge about women as history makers may have serious ramifications affecting the perceptions of women in history.

When you think of images of women in history, what do you see? Do you see pictures of the Pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock with men leading the way and women following behind? Do you see pioneer women tending the fire on the road West? It would not be surprising if these images came to mind because American history textbooks in the past, as well as today, commonly use these types of images of women. Typically, images show women in roles perceived as "women's roles," such as wives, mothers, or caregivers.

Or perhaps you see portraits of women such as Anne Hutchinson, Harriett Beecher Stowe, Susan B. Anthony, or Eleanor Roosevelt. Such images of women acknowledge their achievements, but are premised on the idea that these accomplishments are unusual for women.

The use of carefully and purposefully selected images in the classroom can address both the lack of images of women in textbooks as well as the stereotypical portrayal of woman in textbook images. Using images from sources other than the textbook can generate student enthusiasm and curiosity and develop civic equity. Analyzing images of women can give greater insight

into the way women were viewed in different eras of American history and the extent to which those views have changed.

As elementary teachers make decisions to include or exclude content and images in their curricula, they should examine the images of women that are currently used in American history. Diversifying the images used enhances lessons by including a wider range of people who have contributed to the narrative of American history. Teachers can use the following questions to guide their decisions for choosing images.

Questions to Ask Yourself about Your Use of Images of Women

1. What images do I use to represent women in American history?
2. Do the images represent a wide spectrum of women in their contributions to the time period?
3. Do the images of women include the ordinary and extraordinary roles of women?
4. Are selected images appropriate for the grade level that I teach?
5. Do the images I use incorporate concepts and ideals as set forth for civic equity as stated by the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (2010)?⁵
6. Do the lessons include thoughtful and higher-order thinking questions on the topic of women in American history?
7. What resources should I use to add more images of women in my lessons?
8. Beyond images, what other resources do I use to incorporate women in my instruction?
9. In selecting what is taught about people in America, do I carefully select text and images that represent a range of gender, ethnicity, and social economic levels for the location, event, or time period?
10. Do I regularly evaluate textbook to images in order to supplement and present a balanced view of a multicultural society?

See also the suggestions for image analysis at the websites listed in the **SIDEBAR** on page 18.

A Resource List of Images of Women

Locating images that depict diverse women is challenging. To address the need, some libraries, museums, universities, government agencies, and others who are concerned about history have established digital collections of women's images. To enhance the elementary social studies curriculum, teachers can use these open-source collections.

Based on their curricular needs and developmental needs of students, teachers can use websites listed below to find images. The images of women should depict women in common and uncommon roles and from varied backgrounds. Teachers might preselect images because not all images are appropriate for younger students or relate directly to the content of the lesson. (The images in this article are from photographs shown in full in the following Pullout, with captions on page 1 of the Pullout).

New York Public Library Digital Gallery: Libraries such as the NYPL provide digital galleries of photos, and this site contains over 4,000 images of women in the United States. (<http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchresult.cfm?keyword=women+united+states>)

Women's History Month Images: The Library of Congress hosts the Women's History Month website that has images of women with descriptions, audios/videos, and primary sources for teachers. The site highlights events and projects throughout Women's History Month in March. (<http://womenshistorymonth.gov/photos.html>)

National Women's History Museum: This link is an excellent resource to access artifacts, biographies, and timelines related to women, as well as instructional materials for lessons about individuals and groups of women in American history. (<http://www.nwhm.org/education-resources/history/resources-and-links>)

Smithsonian Institute: This flickr site is a photo stream from the Smithsonian Institute with descriptions of each image. (<http://www.flickr.com/search/?w=25053835@N03&q=womensday&m=text>)

Duke University Libraries Digital Collection: The Digital Collection at Duke University contains over 250 examples of sheet music, posters, ads, and photographs that tell the stories of American women. (<http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/?keyword=american&keyword=women&page=2>)

The History Channel: The History Channel features photos and videos of women that document the diverse accomplishments of women in entertainment, the arts, science, sports, politics, and American history. (<http://www.history.com/topics/womens-history-month/photos>)

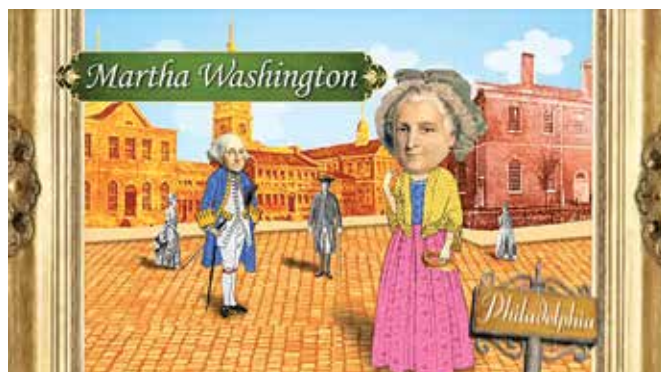
Colonial Williamsburg: That the Future May Learn from the Past." This website was developed by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. The website contains information about nineteen women of the time and an interpretation of their roles. (<http://www.history.org/almanack/people/people.cfm?sort=female>)

Library of Congress, Images of Women during the Civil War: Photographs of African American and White women during the Civil War are cataloged with links to information about the images. (http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/107_civw2.html)

The Women and Social Movements website provides images as well as lessons and activities about social movements in the United States from 1600–2000. In addition, Christine Woysner's article provides examples of how women are presented in social studies. (<http://womhist.alexanderstreet.com/teacher/classroom.htm> and <http://womhist.alexanderstreet.com/teacher/picturing.html>)

National First Ladies Library, "Pop Culture: Images of Women in Advertising" provides links to historical and current images of women in advertisements, as well questions regarding those images. <http://www.firstladies.org/curriculum/curriculum.aspx?Curriculum=1748>

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First Ladies. (2014). The History Channel website. Retrieved 9:43, January 24, 2014, from <http://www.history.com/http://www.history.com/videos/first-ladies>.

Inquiry-Based Questions about Images of Women

After selecting images related to the goals of the lesson, teachers can develop questions about the images of women to activate students' powers of observation, to encourage them to analyze, interpret, and evaluate the images, and to allow students to take their learning beyond the images. Inquiry-based lessons contain questions that guide the learning process and encourage students to think deeply about the content. (The recently released C3 Framework encourages the use of compelling and supporting questions, both teacher- and student-generated, as a central element of the teaching and learning process.)⁶

The three types of questions (with examples given in the **PULLOUT**) are

1. Questions to activate students' powers of observation introduce students to the women in the image, and focus on knowledge and comprehension.
2. Questions for analysis, interpretation, and evaluation provide students with opportunities to use higher order thinking skills, as they develop insights into the roles of women, their relations to others, and develop multiple perspectives.
3. Questions about underrepresented groups—in texts and in society.

Embedding Images of Women in Units and Lessons

Women from different races, cultures, and ethnic groups have been important players in the history of America and are portrayed in images that represent their many roles, such as mothers, domestic workers, laborers, or activists. We considered units where images of women would enhance student understanding of the time period. Below are examples of some of those units, lessons and images. The questions on page P1 of the **PULLOUT** can be posed to move students to upper level thinking about the images, some of which appear on pages P2–P4 of the **PULLOUT**.

Unit: Immigration

Lesson: Immigrants at Work (which can include images of women who worked outside and inside the home)

Image: Immigrant Mother with Children

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/nclc.04116/>

The National Child Labor Committee documented working class families, urban housing conditions, industrial sites, and the movement to reform child labor. The photo depicts an Italian family who immigrated to New York, as the mother learns to make lace for a nearby factory (1911).

Unit: World War II

Lesson: Workforce Demands at Home and Abroad (which includes images of women's contributions to meeting the industrial needs for the war and their role in society)

Image: Women During World War II

[http://www.womensmemorial.org/H&C/History/wwii\(mcwr\).html](http://www.womensmemorial.org/H&C/History/wwii(mcwr).html)
The Marine Corps Women's Reserve (WR) was established in 1943 to fulfill the workforce demands of the two-front war.

Unit: The Amendments to the Constitution

Lesson: The Nineteenth Amendment (Susan B. Anthony was one of many women who contributed to the Suffrage Movement, which led to the adoption of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution)

Image: Susan B. Anthony

<http://www.nps.gov/woi/historyculture/susan-b-anthony.htm/index.htm>

Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906) was a well-known contributor to the National Woman's Suffrage Association. The Nineteenth Amendment was named the Susan B. Anthony Amendment.

Unit: U.S. Presidents and First Ladies

Lesson: The Many Roles of Women in the White House (Women in the White House are responsible for fulfilling the role of the First Lady and family member)

Image: Michelle Obama's trip to South Africa and Botswana

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/photogallery/first-ladys-2011-trip-south-africa-and-botswana>

As a private and public figure, First Lady Michelle Obama fulfills a variety of roles. As a mother and wife, a spokesperson for better nutrition and more healthful lifestyles, or as an ambassador of global goodwill, her influence is strong and recognizable.

Assessment Strategies

After students interrogate the images and gain a fuller understanding of how women fill out the time period under study, it is logical to include assessment activities that allow students to employ their analyses of those images. The activities below can be modified to fit a variety of contexts.

- Create a poem, story, blog, documentary, or diary entries that chronicle a month in the life of a woman in a specific time period. Find and analyze several images of the same woman.
- Compare and contrast images of women, and their larger implications, in a specific time period.
- Compare and contrast images of women and men, girls and boys, and their larger implications, in a specific time period.
- Develop a multimedia presentation on a specific theme, woman, or historical period.



SIDEBAR: Websites that Provide Tools for Analyzing Images

Analyzing Primary

Sources (Photographs): Library of Congress

www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/guides.html

Exploring Photographs: Lesson 1, Methods of Visual Analysis;
The J. Paul Getty Museum

www.getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom_resources/curricula/exploring_photographs/lesson01.html

Photo analysis worksheet: National Archives

www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/photo_analysis_worksheet.pdf

Making Sense of Documentary Photography: History
Matters

historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/photos/

Conclusion

Children spend a large portion of their lives in the classroom, and it is in the classroom where civic equity and democratic ideals can be taught.⁷ However, schools reflect the inequities of society. When women and images of women are marginalized in the curriculum, the impression given to both boys and girls is that women are not as important as men and have made few significant contributions to history.⁸ Teachers can give students opportunities to explore a greater range of images and how those images affect their thinking, thereby encouraging students to take fresh perspectives on how they view themselves and others in our multicultural democracy. When issues of gender (as well as race, ethnicity, and class) can be discussed in open forums, a foundational principle of democracy, a place is created for the possibility of greater understanding and respect. By “remembering the ladies,” elementary teachers can help to develop civic equity within their classroom and in the larger community in which their students live. 🌍

Notes

1. Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, (1803); reprinted in *Jane Austen, 8 Books in One* (London, UK: Shoes, Ships and Sealing Wax, 2006), 605-682.
2. Gerda Lerner, “Placing Women in History,” *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 1/2 (1975): 5-14; Janice L. Trecker, “Women in U. S. History Textbooks,” *Social Education* 35, no. 3 (1971): 251-260, 338.

3. Michelle Commeyras and Donna E. Alvermann, “Reading About Women in World History Textbooks from One Feminist Perspective,” *Gender and Education* 8, no. 1 (1996): 31-48; Kristine M. Larsen, “Women in Astronomy: Inclusion in Introductory Textbooks,” *American Association of Physics Teachers* 63, no. 2 (1995): 121-131; Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault, “The Journey from Male-defined to Gender-balanced education,” *Theory into Practice* 25, no. 4 (1986): 227-234.
4. Kay A. Chick, “Gender Balance in K-12 American History Textbooks,” *Social Studies Research and Practice* 25, no. 4 (2006): 284-290; Roger Clark, Jeffrey Allard and Timothy Maloney, “How Much the Sky? Women in American High School Textbooks from the 1960s, 1980s, and the 1990s,” *Social Education* 68, no. 1 (January/February 2004): 57-62
5. National Council for the Social Studies, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010).
6. National Council for the Social Studies, *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013).
7. Michael W. Apple, *Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
8. Mary Ruthsdotter, “Writing Women Back into History,” *Education Digest* 61, no. 7 (1996): 13-16.

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