



Virginia C.A.R. Patriots of the Round Table *Mercy Otis Warren*

18th Century “Influencer”

The victory at Yorktown would not have been possible without the Declaration of Independence, and the Continental Congress would not have declared independence if the people did not favor independence. Beginning in 1772 and continuing through the war, Mercy Otis Warren wrote plays, poems and pamphlets that influenced others to support independence from Great Britain and the Revolution.



Mercy Otis Warren was born in September 1728 near Plymouth, Massachusetts. Her father, James Otis, was a judge, a colonel in the militia, a member of the state legislature, and, eventually, an outspoken opponent of British rule. Although she received no formal schooling, she was able to learn a great deal from her uncle, the Rev. Jonathan Russell, who tutored her brothers and allowed her to study by their side in all subjects other than Latin and Greek.

In 1754, Mercy Otis married James Warren, a merchant and farmer, who served in the Massachusetts House of Representatives, as president of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress and as Paymaster-General of the Continental Army. Mercy Warren supported

her husband’s political activities, and their Plymouth home was often a meeting place for local politicians and revolutionaries, including the Sons of Liberty. After her brother James was brutally beaten by colonial revenue officers in 1769, Mercy Warren was increasingly drawn to political activism and hosted protest meetings at her home.

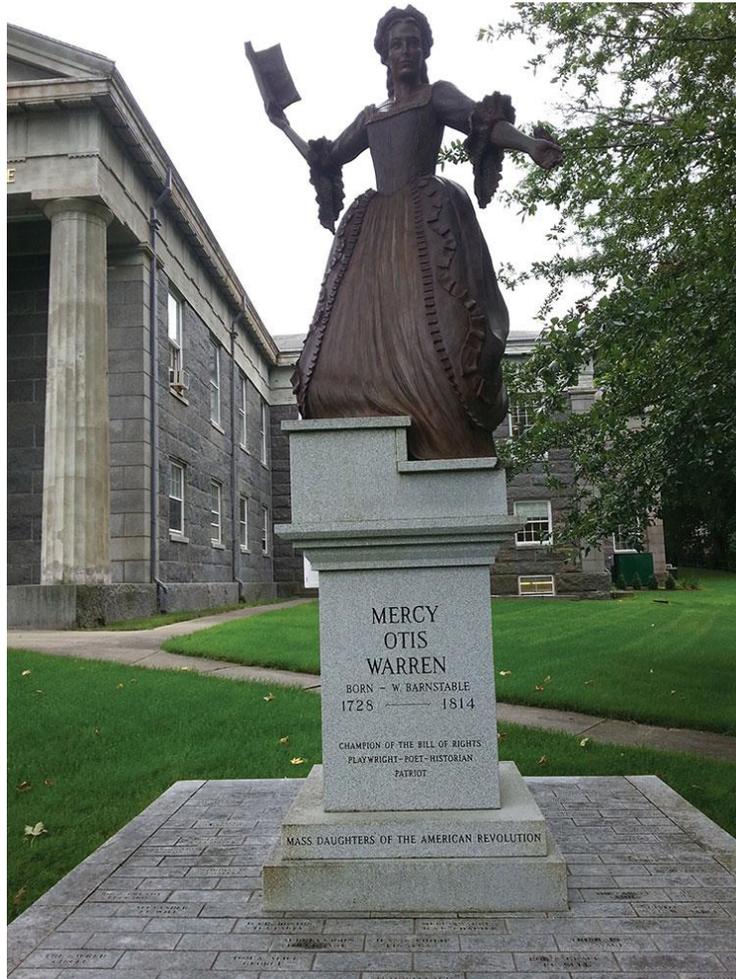
Early in the revolutionary movement, Mercy Warren wrote two popular anti-British plays that helped kindle the spirit of revolution. In 1772, she wrote *The Adulateur*, a satirical play mocking the administration of the royal governor, Thomas Hutchinson. The play depicted the governor as the tyrannical Rapatlo, who ruled a fictional country and vowed to destroy his rebellious subjects. Aligned against him were virtuous patriots with Latin names who predicted that the patriots would eventually triumph. The play was so popular that it was later published as a pamphlet. In *The Defeat*, published in 1773, she portrayed Hutchinson even more darkly. Following the Boston Tea Party in December 1773, she wrote a poem celebrating the event – *The Squabble of the Sea Nymphs* – at the request of John Adams, who had it published on the front page of the Boston Gazette.

After the war began, and victory was not quickly achieved, public support for the revolution ebbed, and Mercy Warren picked up her pen again. She wrote an anonymous political poem, “The Genius of America Weeping the Absurd Follies of the Day,” which appeared in October 1778 in the Boston Gazette. The poem was designed to instill courage into wavering patriots and chastise those who put personal gain above the cause.

Warren was one of the most convincing writers during the Revolution, and her works inspired others to become Patriots. Her work earned the congratulations of numerous prominent leaders of the Revolution, including George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, who remarked, “In the career of dramatic composition at least, female genius in the United States has outstripped the male.”

Following the Revolution, as political factions developed, Warren was an anti-Federalist in a predominantly Federalist country. In 1788, she published *Observations on the New Constitution*, detailing her opposition to the Constitution because it included a strong central government and did not include a statement of individual rights. In 1805, Warren completed a three-volume history of the Revolution, entitled *A History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*. Warren died on October 19, 1814, at the age of 86, six years after her husband died in 1808.

Mercy Warren’s plays and other writings helped prepare the people of Massachusetts and the other colonies for independence and the war necessary to achieve it. She was the 18th century equivalent of an “influencer,” convincing others that the country could and should be independent. The people who went to her plays or read her words were inspired to support the patriot cause, to believe that it was a righteous cause, and to endure the sacrifices required to achieve independence. She is rightly known as “the Conscience of the Revolution” and counted among the Founders of the United States.



A statue outside the Barnstable County (Massachusetts) Courthouse honors Mercy Otis Warren.

The SS Mercy Warren, a World War II Liberty ship launched in 1943, was named for this Patriot. In 2002, she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, New York.

Discussion Questions for Local Societies

Why would a play or poem be an important piece of persuasive writing in the 18th century?

Why did Mercy Otis Warren publish her works during the Revolution anonymously?

Why were patriots wavering in their support for the Revolution in 1778?

Was Mercy Otis Warren really in the inner circle? Investigate using primary sources. Does she sound like a friend or a mere acquaintance in a letter she wrote to George Washington in 1790?

<https://founders.archives.gov/?q=mercy%20otis%20warren%20Recipient%3A%22Washington%2C%20George%22&s=1111311112&r=4>

Resources

For more about Warren's background and life:

<https://archive.org/details/firstladyofrevol00anth>

For more about how Warren's writings influenced the Revolution:

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/woman-whose-words-inflamed-american-revolution-180963765/>

For modern views on her history of the *Revolution, A History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.25290/prinunivlibrchro.72.2.0513#metadata_info_tab_contents