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Spiritual Spinning Wheels: Religion's Role in Women's Spinning Bees During the American Revolution

History

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The boycott of British goods and the emphasis on homespun are well-known pieces of the American Revolution. Because of their domestic role, the task of creating homespun goods naturally fell to the women of the American colonies. Spinning bees were one of the more public examples of women's efforts and these gatherings varied in size and the women would spend the day at their spinning wheels carding and spinning yarn which could then be woven into cloth. Traditionally these women's actions have been interpreted as political expression and support for the Patriot cause. However, by examining colonial newspapers from the period, a pattern emerges of these bees taking place at minister's homes and often including a sermon or scripture reading. With this context in mind, this research will explore in the New England colonies the influence of religion on women's involvement in the spinning bees and investigate spirituality's role as opposed to politics in participants' motivation. How did the women's religious convictions overlap with their political thoughts? What influence did ministers, sermons, and the religious ideas of the day have on how women approached political expression and involvement? Answering these questions requires examining specific ministers who hosted bees, such as Ezra Stiles of Newport, Rhode Island. It also means looking at the context of spinning in colonial culture, and what its role reveals about women's perceived place and duties within their society. The focus of the research however, investigates what the presence of the ministers reveals about the Christian altruism and spiritual values that motivated women to participate in the bees, and how this influences historical analysis of women's participation in the American Revolution.