



Elizabeth Murray: A Woman's Pursuit of Independence in Eighteenth-Century America

Patricia Cleary

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One of the most compelling figures in colonial America, Elizabeth Murray (1726--1785) was a Scottish immigrant who settled in Boston in her early twenties and took up shopkeeping. For many years, she practiced her trade successfully while marrying three times, once to a much older man who left her an extremely rich widow. This biography chronicles the life of this extraordinary "ordinary" woman who tried to make a place for herself and other women in the world by asserting her own independence inside and outside of the home.

As an importer and retailer of British goods, Murray conducted business with merchants and manufacturers in England and buyers in the American colonies, even traveling to London to select her own stock. Deeply satisfied by her work and the economic freedom it brought her, she acted as mentor to other women, helping them to establish shops of their own. She also protected her autonomy by demanding prenuptial agreements from her second and third husbands that gave her a measure of control over her property that was rare for a married woman of her day.

The spirit of independence that Murray so valued in herself and nurtured in other women was severely tested by the upheavals of the American Revolution. With strong loyalties to both Britain and America, she was torn by the conflict, especially when close relatives chose opposing sides and her third husband abandoned her, leaving her to defend the family estate alone. Her wartime experiences -- wild midnight rides, accusations of being a spy, quartering both royal and rebel troops, and brief imprisonment -- vividly capture the turmoil of the Revolution and highlight the range of her political commitments.

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