

Understanding Impact

A Printer's Role in the American Revolution: Mary Katherine and the Declaration of Independence

Historical Context

Mary Katharine Goddard (1738–1816) was an early American printer, publisher, and postmaster whose contributions during the Revolutionary era exemplify civic courage and highlight the often overlooked roles women played in shaping the nation. In January 1777, amid the turbulence of the American Revolution, the Continental Congress, temporarily relocated to Baltimore, commissioned Goddard to print the first official broadside of the Declaration of Independence that included the names of its signatories. This edition, known as the "Goddard Broadside," was significant not only for its content but also because it prominently bore Goddard's name at the bottom. This which was a bold and risky act, considering that associating oneself with the Declaration was deemed treasonous by the British. Her willingness to publicly align with the revolutionary cause placed her at personal risk, showing her commitment to American independence. It was also an act of defiance toward gender roles; usually, Goddard signed her documents "M.K. Goddard," but for this broadside, she printed her full name, identifying her as a woman. Beyond her printing endeavors, Goddard broke gender barriers by serving as the postmaster of Baltimore from 1775 to 1789, likely making her the first woman to hold such a position in colonial America. Her tenure was marked by dedication, efficiency, and widespread respect from her community. However, in 1789, she was abruptly removed from her role under the pretext that the position required extensive travel deemed inappropriate for a woman. This dismissal is widely believed to have been politically motivated rather than based on performance. In response, Goddard wrote a passionate petition for reinstatement, signed by over 200 prominent Baltimore residents who praised her competence, reliability, and integrity. This petition not only demonstrates her considerable local support but also demonstrates her remarkable advocacy for women's rights in a period when such actions were rare and courageous. Further exemplifying her determination, Goddard personally wrote to President George Washington on December 23, 1789, appealing directly for her reinstatement as Postmaster. In her eloquent and assertive letter, she expressed her distress over the unjust treatment she had received, emphasizing her years of faithful service and her contributions to the revolutionary cause. Washington acknowledged receipt of her letter but ultimately did not intervene to reverse the decision. Mary Katharine Goddard's legacy thus extends beyond her revolutionary era printing and postal services, embodying the broader struggles of women seeking recognition and fairness. Her story embodies the intersection of gender, politics, and print culture during United States' founding,

Connection to Habit

Understanding Mary Katharine Goddard's impact means seeing how her personal actions and advocacy influenced conversations about women's roles in society and the workplace. Even though her bold efforts didn't immediately reverse her dismissal, they had lasting effects by challenging traditional views on gender and setting examples for future generations. Her story shows us that historical impacts can happen quickly or slowly, intentionally or unintentionally, and that every brave action can create change. Goddard's experiences highlight why it's important to look at how individuals and institutions shape history.

Discussion Questions

- Why was Mary Katharine Goddard's decision to print her name on the Declaration of Independence broadside so risky during the Revolutionary War?
- How did Goddard's petition for reinstatement and her letter to George Washington demonstrate both advocacy and resilience?
- In what ways did Goddard's actions have both short-term and long-term impacts? Can you think of any unintended consequences her fight might have had?
- How might the people of Baltimore who signed her petition have viewed her removal? What does their support say about community values during this time period?
- What lessons can we learn from Goddard's story about the roles individuals play in shaping history? How can one person's actions inspire larger movements?
- Are there modern examples of people challenging unfair systems, like Goddard did? What similarities or differences do you notice between their struggles and hers?

Suggested Activity

Materials Needed:

- Signs: Low and High Risk
- White Board or Chart Paper
- Dry erase markers or Markers
- Sticky Notes
- Printed or Digital copies of [Goddard Broadside](#) and [Goddard's letter to Washington](#)
- Pencil/Pen

Step 1: Courage Walk [5 mins]

Set up: Put up two signs on opposite walls of the room:

- One side: Low Risk
- Other side: High Risk

Prompt students: "If you lived during the American Revolution, how risky would it be to print your name on the Declaration of Independence? Walk to where you think your action belongs on the spectrum."

Briefly discuss:

- Why did you choose that spot?
- What risks might Goddard have faced?

Step 2: Primary Source Activity: Imagine You Are... [15-20 mins]

Split the classroom white board in half or use a large chart paper labeling one side "Goddard Broadside" and the other side "Goddard's letter to Washington". Then, pair students together and give them sticky notes and a printed or digital copy of the following primary sources:

- Source 1: [Goddard Broadside](#)
- Source 2: [Goddard's letter to Washington](#)

Students write their messages on sticky notes to post on the board in the correct section once they complete the following:

For the Broadside:

- Imagine you are Mary Katharine Goddard. Write a two-sentence 'courage message' you would send to the people who might criticize you for printing this.

For the Letter:

- Imagine you are Washington. Write a two-sentence reply to Goddard. Will you help her or not? Why?

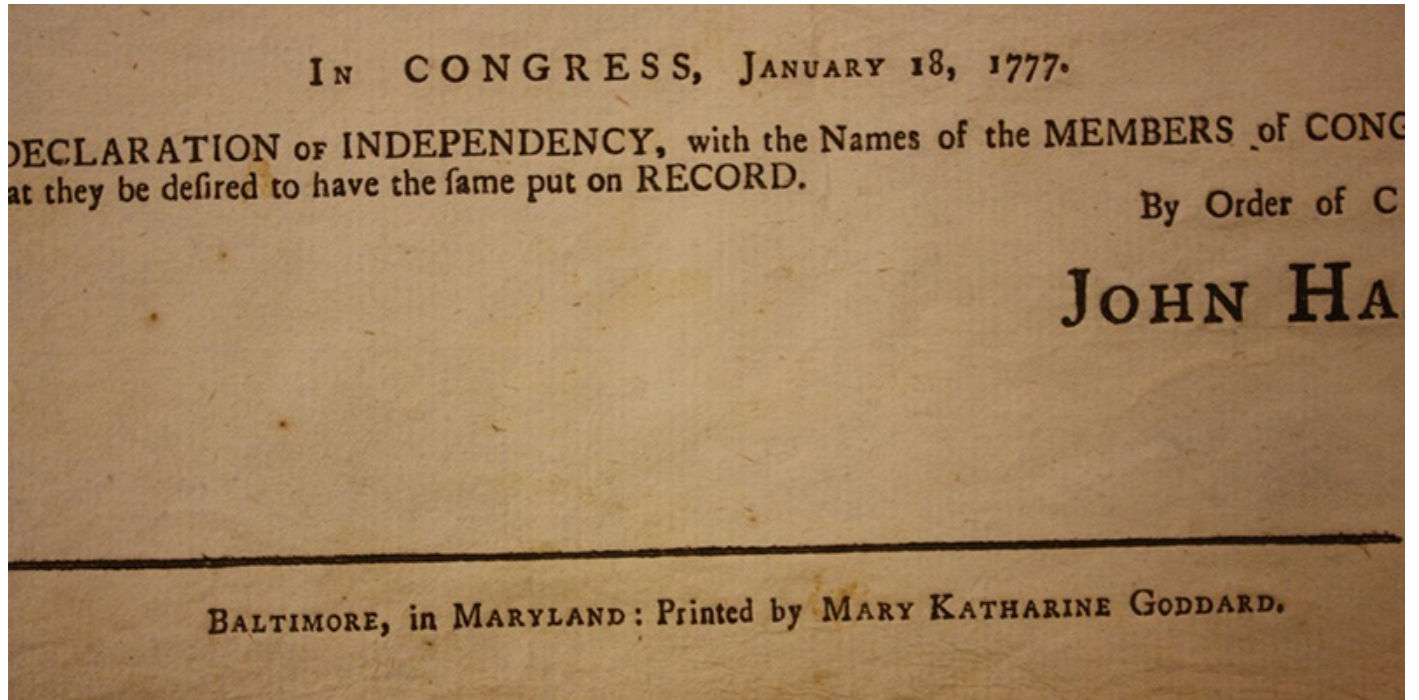
Step 3: Group Reflection and Sticky Note Share [5-10 mins]

Gather everyone back for a whole-class debrief. Read a few sticky notes responses aloud for the Broadside and the letter to Washington. Then ask students the following questions to answer as a class:

- What does this activity tell us about the risks Goddard took?
- How were her risks different from those taken by men in the same time period?
- Even though Goddard didn't get her job back, what kind of impact did she still make?
- Why do small acts of courage still matter?

Primary Source 1

[Zoomed In] The Declaration of Independence, printed in Baltimore by Mary Katharine Goddard, Library of Congress (January 1777)



Source: [United States & Continental Congress Broadside Collection](https://www.loc.gov/item/90898037/). (1777) In Congress, July 4, . The unanimous declaration of the thirteen United States of America. [Baltimore, in Maryland: Printed by Mary Katharine Goddard]. [Online Text]. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/90898037/>.

Primary Source 2

Letter: George Washington from Mary Katharine Goddard (December 23, 1789)

From Mary Katherine Goddard
Baltimore, Decemr 23d 1789.

The Representation of Mary Katherine Goddard, Humbly sheweth—That She hath kept the Post Office at Baltimore for upwards of fourteen years; but with what degree of Satisfaction to all those concerned, She begs leave to refer to the number & respectability of the Persons who have publickly addressed the Post Master General & his Assistant, on the Subject of her late removal from Office; And as Mr Osgood has not yet favoured between two and three hundred of the principal Merchants & Inhabitants of Baltimore with an answer to their last application, transmitted to him by Post on the 19th Day of November ultimo,¹ nor with any Answer to sundry private Letters, accompanying the transcript of a like application, made to Mr Burrell when at Baltimore: She therefore, at the instance of the Gentlemen thus pleased to interest themselves on her behalf, lays before your Excellenchery, Superintendant of that department, as briefly as possible, the nature & circumstances, of what is conceived to be an extraordinary Act of oppression towards her.

That upon the dissolution of the old Government, when from the non importation Agreement and other causes incident to the Revolution, the Revenue of the Post-Office was inadequate to its disbursements, She accepted of the same, and at her own risque, advanced hard money to defray the Charges of Post Riders for many years, when they were not to be procured on any other terms; and that during this period, the whole of her Labour & Industry in establishing the Office was necessarily unrewarded; the Emoluments of which being by no means equal to the then high Rent of an Office, or to the Attention required both to receive & forward the Mails, as will evidently appear <by> the Schedule, here unto annexed,² and therefore, whoever thus established & continued the Office, at <the> gloomy period when it was worth no Person's Acceptance, ought surely to be thought worthy of it, when it became more valuable. And as it had been universally understood, that no Person would be removed from Office, under the present Government, unless manifest misconduct appeared, and as no such Charge could possibly be made against her, with the least colour of Justice, She was happy in the Idea of being secured both in her Office, and the Protection of all those who wished well to the prosperity of the Post Office, & the new Government in general.

Primary Source 2 cont.

Letter: George Washington from Mary Katharine Goddard (December 23, 1789)

That She has sustained many heavy losses, well known to the Gentlemen of Baltimore, which swallowed up the Fruits of her Industry, without even extricating her from embarrassment to this day, although her Accounts with the Post Office were always considered, as amongst the most punctual & regular of any upon the Continent; notwithstanding which She has been discharged from her Office, without any imputation of the least fault, and without any previous official notice: The first intimation on that head being an Order from Mr Burrell,³ whilst at Baltimore, to deliver up the Office to the Bearer of his Note; and altho' he had been there several days, yet he did not think proper to indulge her with a personal Interview, thus far treating her in the Stile of an unfriendly delinquent, unworthy of common Civility, as well as common Justice. And although Mr White, who succeeded her, might doubtless have been meritorious in the different Offices he sustained, yet, She humbly conceives, he was not more deserving of public notice & protection in his Station, than She has uniformly been in hers: It must therefore become a matter of serious Importance & of peculiar distress to her, if Government can find no means of rewarding this Gentleman's Services, but at the Expence of all that She had to rely on, for her future dependence & subsistence.

That it has been alledged as a Plea for her removal, that the Deputy Post Master of Baltimore will hereafter be obliged to ride & regulate the Offices to the Southward but that She conceives, with great deference to the Post Master General, (mutilated) impracticable, & morally impossible; because the business of the Baltimore Office will require his constant Attendance, & he alone could give satisfaction to the people, if therefore the duties of the Assistant, Mr Burrells' Office are to be performed by any other than himself, surely it cannot well be attempted by those who are fully occupied with their own; and as two Persons must be employed, according to this new Plan, She apprehends, that She is more adequate to give Instructions to the Riding Post Master, how to act than any other Person possibly could, heretofore unexperienced in such business. She, therefore, most humbly hopes from your Excellency's Philanthropy and wonted Humanity, You will take her Situation into Consideration; and as the Grievance complained of, has happened whilst the Post Office Department was put under your auspicious Protection, by a Resolve of Congress,⁴ that Your Excellency will be graciously pleased to order, that She may be restored to her former Office, and as in duty bound, She will ever pray &c.

Mary K: Goddard