

[Szilagyi on Good, 'Founding Friendships: Friendships between Men and Women in the Early American Republic'](#)

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Cassandra A. Good. *Founding Friendships: Friendships between Men and Women in the Early American Republic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 304 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-937617-9.

Reviewed by Chrissie Szilagyi (Delta College) **Published on** H-USA (May, 2016) **Commissioned by** Donna Sinclair

The issue of mixed-sex friendships is one that has caused difficulty throughout history. Only in recent generations have people truly accepted the idea that non-romantic friendship between men and women is possible. Cassandra A. Good's *Founding Friendships* points to this change beginning in the United States during the postrevolutionary era. Good argues, "The friendships between elite men and women helped create the social and political fabric of the new nation" (p. 1). These friendships represented the ideals of the Republic and were partly based on the Greco-Roman fraternal ideal (with an adjustment to allow for the inclusion of women). These friendships offered women a role in the Republic, even if it was unofficial. "Friendships between men and women broke through many of the limitations on the founding ideals. These relationships were truer to the ideals of freedom, choice, virtue, and equality than any other relationships between men and women in the period" (p. 6). These friendships were also specifically differentiated from, and valued over, mixed-sex friendships in Europe, which often served to cover extramarital affairs and/or political machinations.

The book makes a study of a number of different friendships in the revolutionary and postrevolutionary eras, some from well-known figures of the era and others not so well known. Good begins the book in a narrative fashion, with "Three Stories of Friendship." In this chapter, she gives an overview of three well-documented friendships that lasted throughout the people's lives. Good begins with, and spends the most time on, what is probably the best-known male-female friendship of the era, even to non-historians: that of Abigail Adams and Thomas Jefferson. She then continues to the friendship between Eloise Richards Payne and William Ellery Channing, and concludes the chapter with Mary Pierce and Charles Greely Loving. Good shows that friendships give their members emotional support beyond and in addition to that found within their families. For example, both Jefferson and Adams expressed sympathy and grief with each other on the occasions of deaths in the family. These friendships also allowed the women involved to express themselves about traditionally male-dominated issues, politics in the case of Adams, academics and theology in the case of Payne. All of these relationships were perceived by their members as between equals, giving women a power that they did not have in other relationships in their lives. "A female friend was not obligated to follow a male friend's advice.... A friendship between a man and a woman, even when the man served as mentor, thus gave a woman an opportunity to engage as a man's equal, the freedom to shape the relationships to suit both of their needs, and the choice to leave the friendship behind if it no longer suited her" (pp. 24-25).

While much of the book focuses on friendships that are evidenced by letters, the second chapter looks

at the portrayal of friendships in literature of the era, including etiquette books, magazines, novels, and poetry. These are seen as guides and examples of both good and bad behavior. These showed that the ideal friendship was between men, in part because the ideal mixed-sex relationship was romantic and culminated in marriage. Because this romantic possibility was always perceived as an outlying potential in a male-female friendship, these relationships were used in “seduction novels” to show the impossibility and impropriety of such friendships. At the same time, other works of the era show a positive aspect of such friendships, with the woman acting as a “softening influence” upon her male friend. The only place where a straightforward literary example of mixed-sex friendships can be found is in poetry, but this is never given as an exemplar because of the often romantic-sounding verbiage used.

The next two chapters discuss the issues of propriety in friendships, and how easily the public could misconstrue such relationships. Sexual attraction was an accepted factor in male-female friendships, “whether as public perception, unspoken possibility, or an acknowledged part of the relationship” (p. 58). Friends had to be careful in the language used to define and express their friendship; words such as “love” could be misconstrued, while others, such as “esteem,” were considered safe adjectives to express one’s feelings. Misunderstood friendships could destroy the reputation of both parties (though the woman was always at a greater risk than the man), and could even lead to litigation, as in the cases of “criminal conversation” discussed by Good, such as the man who was prosecuted for attempted seduction of a married woman who was his friend. Propriety was best maintained by the inclusion of a third party, ideally the spouse of one or both of the friends. Good gives a number of examples of such extended friendships, the best known of which will again bring us to Adams and Jefferson, for whom John Adams served as the third party. Friendships within religious communities were able to claim God as a third party. Propriety could also be maintained by the creation of fictive kin relationships, in which the family of one of the friends served as the third party by welcoming in the other as a fictive aunt, cousin, brother, etc.

The author concludes with a chapter titled “The Power of Friendship,” which discusses the ways in which women were empowered in both private and public matters by their choice of friends. In private matters, women had moral/religious and domestic influence, which could translate to influence on public matters of morality. In matters of politics, women were generally considered unfit, not because they lacked the intellect but because they lacked the temperament; this did not prevent them from acting to collect and disseminate information from and to their male friends who were active in politics. “Whether via patronage, political information, or influence, women in particular gained political power via their friendships” (p. 164).

Good’s work is, overall, a well-written and interesting look at a little-discussed element of the social history of the early United States. Good provides a balanced perspective on these issues in a format that is readable and could easily be used in most college classrooms.

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