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Episode 339: Mary Sarah Bilder, Women and the Constitutional Moment of 1787

Announcer: [00:00:00](#) You're listening to an AirWave Media podcast.

Liz Covart: [00:00:04](#) *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of the Omohundro Institute, and is sponsored by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Liz Covart: [00:00:19](#) Hello, and welcome to Episode 339 of *Ben Franklin's World*, the podcast dedicated to helping you learn more about how the people and events of our early American past have shaped the present-day world we live in. And I'm your host, Liz Covart.

Between May 25th and September 17th, 1787, delegates from each of the United States's 13 states assembled in Philadelphia for an event that we now call the Constitutional Convention. The purpose of this Convention was to rework and amend the United States's first Constitution, the Articles of Confederation, but as many of the delegates thought the Articles inadequate to the needs of the new nation, the Convention actually set about work drafting a new Constitution, a Constitution created to solve the real problems of national government in 1787 and a Constitution which is still in effect today. So, what do we know about the moment of the United States Constitution's creation?

Liz Covart: [00:01:15](#) What was happening around the Convention, and what issues were Americans discussing and debating as the Convention's delegates met? Mary Sarah Bilder, an award-winning historian and the Founders Professor of Law at Boston College Law School, joins us to investigate the context of the United States Constitution's creation through the eyes in experiences of little-known woman named Eliza Harriot, who was among the many Americans who pushed for women's inclusion in the new Constitution, and in the new constitutional state it created. Now, as we learn about Eliza Harriot and the push for women's inclusion in early American politics, Mary reveals information about Eliza Harriot and her efforts to promote the idea of female genius; the ways in which early Americans believed that education went hand in hand with a healthy representative government; and the feeling of probability for women's inclusion in the early American political state, as seen in early voting rights, changing views on girls' education, and the gender-neutral language of the United States Constitution.

Liz Covart: [00:02:15](#) But first, the United States Constitution is really an amazing document and it's always worth reading. So, if you haven't had a



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chance to read the Constitution, or if you haven't had a chance to read the Constitution in a while, be sure you visit the show notes page, because I've included links to the United States National Archives. The United States National Archives houses and protects our original copy of the Constitution, and it's built some really wonderful web exhibits about the document, including images of the original Constitution and a full transcription of it. And you'll find links to these web exhibits at benfranklinworld.com/339.

Liz Covart:

All right, are you ready to investigate the constitutional moment of 1787? Allow me to introduce you to our guest historian.

Joining us is the Founders Professor of Law at Boston College Law School. Her research specialty is an American legal and constitutional history. She's the author of several books, including her Bancroft Award-winning book, *Madison's Hand: Revising the Constitutional Convention*, which you can hear her discuss in episode 107. And today she joins us to discuss her most recent book, *Female Genius: Eliza Harriot and George Washington at the Dawn of the Constitution*. Welcome back to *Ben Franklin's World*, Mary Sarah Bilder.

Mary Sarah Bilder:

[00:03:46](#)

Oh, thanks Liz for having me back, that's a great podcast to be on, and I'm really excited to be here to talk about my new book.

Liz Covart:

[00:03:52](#)

And we're really glad to have you back, Mary. Now, speaking of your new book, *Female Genius*, you've written several books about the United States Constitution, which was ratified in 1789. Your new book also studies the US Constitution, but really focuses on a particular character that most of us have never heard of, Eliza Harriot. So, would you tell us about Eliza Harriot and how you came to know her?

Mary Sarah Bilder:

[00:04:16](#)

So let me start by her dates, because I think that's always a great way to sort of know where we're talking. She was born in 1749 and she died in 1811. She's born in Lisbon, Portugal, and dies actually in Columbia, South Carolina. And she's a woman who's an amazing female educator, she's probably the first woman to give a public speech and actually course of lectures at a university. I argue in the book that she embodies this idea of female genius in the 1770s and 1780s, and that her appearance in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787 probably helped create a Constitution that was at least *possibly*



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open to female participation. So, she's really an amazing, just incredible person.

- Liz Covart:** [00:05:08](#) She really sounds like she was amazing, and I know we're looking forward to learning more about her life. Now, "female genius" is a term that comes up quite often in your book, *Female Genius*. So, would you tell us about this characteristic and what traits you see as embodied by that term?
- Mary Sarah Bilder:** [00:05:25](#) So, it's a word that, in the beginning, I didn't even notice when I started this project and then I suddenly realized, "wait, I keep seeing this idea everywhere." And then I noticed it actually is the idea that encapsulates that women are not inferiors. So, if we think back on the Western intellectual and political tradition, we can see that people had this idea that women were inferior in all sorts of different ways. But what that meant in the 16th, 17th, 18th century world was that they could not participate in politics in what we might think of as the constitutional state. And in the 1770s and 1780s, people begin - particularly women begin - to imagine that they can finally flip this argument and they can do this by showing that women have capacity. And that's this idea of "female genius." "Genius" is a word that means something a little bit different in this time period.
- Mary Sarah Bilder:** [00:06:28](#) It actually means a capacity or ability of the mind, it's just beginning to have the kind of proto-romantic notion of a truly exceptional person. So, putting female in front of this word, which was almost exclusively used for men, was a way of explaining that women had capacity, or to put it slightly differently, that people who were not men had capacity. And, if they had capacity, they could then participate in all of the aspects of the world, particularly the constitutional state that men could. And so we see this word, "female genius," suddenly appearing on both sides of the Atlantic. A really great example of this is a poem by a woman called Mary Scott in the 1770s, and it's called *The Female Advocate*, and we can see that word "female," and then the word "advocate," both referring to a lawyer, but also an argument. And she goes through and describes remarkable women who establish female genius. And one of those women actually is Phyllis Wheatley, the great African American poet who had recently been in England, promoting her poetry.



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- Liz Covart:** [00:07:38](#) It's really interesting to think about this term, "female genius," and how people in the 18th century were actually using this term. Because, if you think about it, it's kind of novel in the sense that in the 18th century, women are not usually given a lot of credit for having minds in which they could think or have the ability to participate in public discourse and politics. Women just weren't really seen as people who had views and ideas about politics and the larger world.
- Mary Sarah Bilder:** [00:08:06](#) One of the things that I really found interesting about this book was that the book tries to reorder our chronology of this period. Sometimes we think, or sort of traditionally we've tended to think that there's a progressive, almost Whig notion of this idea, where suddenly around 1792, with Mary Wollstonecraft, women first get the idea that they should participate in the constitutional state. And one of the things I'm really happy about this new book of mine is, it reorders that chronology, it shows that first of all, going way back you can find women who make this argument, but that particularly in the 1770s and 1780s, this period that I call the Age of the Constitution, women begin to once again, in a very concerted way, make this argument, and that we can see that this is part of a much larger effort by women in the arts and in history and political writing and political participation, particularly in England, to articulate the idea that they have equal capacity and that they can participate in the constitutional state. So, one of the things the book really does is it gathers together an enormous amount of scholarship over the last 20 and 30 years that in different avenues has established this point. And then it sort of puts it into a new narrative in which Mary Wollstonecraft becomes just one of many voices making this argument.
- Liz Covart:** [00:09:31](#) Mary Wollstonecraft, of course, being an English woman and author who, among other works, wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. Well, now that we have a really good idea of the broader context of this constitutional moment, where Americans are writing a new Constitution, and American women are really pushing to be admitted into the constitutional state, let's get to know Eliza Harriot a little better. Mary, would you tell us how you discovered Eliza Harriot and what we can know about her early life?
- Mary Sarah Bilder:** [00:10:03](#) Yeah, she's a person who's floated around in my brain for a long time. When I was working on my book, *Madison's Hand*, I read all



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of the diaries or records of the summer of 1787, and one of my favorite records is George Washington's diary. George Washington kept a diary during the time he was in Philadelphia in 1787. And he actually rewrote that diary in the fall when he returned to Mount Vernon. And he never recorded what happened inside the room, but he recorded lots of things that he did outside of the room. And on May 18th, he records that he went with Mary Morris, Mary White Morris, who he was staying with, and some other ladies, to hear a lady talk at the College Hall. And I kept being like, "who is this lady?" And "is that unusual? Is that usual?" And "what is he doing there?" And I think very importantly for me, "what does it mean?"

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:11:00](#)

And you know how this is as a historian, there's these incidents that happen that you think, "wait, there's something there. Like, I don't quite know what's there yet, but there's something significant about this." So, I went back as part of a much larger project that I've been working on about the framing generation, about conceptualizing the framing moment as not a story only about the white men inside the room, but understanding the way that the Constitution as a system of government is created out of an entire generation of people, most of whom aren't inside the Convention Hall. And so, I went back with that idea to see if I could figure out who that lady was. And then the fact that she gave lectures, that Washington attended them, tells us about the summer of 1787. And I came away with this sort of just really amazing story about her presence, her importance, and then being able to reinterpret, along with a fabulous set of scholarship that's been written recently, how we understand sort of the relationship of women to the constitutional state.

Liz Covart: [00:12:10](#)

So, the diary of George Washington leads you to this woman, who's giving lectures at College Hall, which is at the University of Pennsylvania, and you discover it's Eliza Harriot. How did Eliza Harriot develop into a public speaker who spoke at universities like Penn in the late-18th century? We sometimes read of women who had these parents who are of the rare type that believed even in the 18th century, that their daughters should be supported with a formal education. So, was Eliza one of these formally educated women?

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:12:42](#)

Her story is so interesting. So, she's born in 1749 in Lisbon, Portugal, to British parents. She was born at what was called the



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British factory, which was a British outpost of the sort of Mercantile Admiralty, and on both sides of her family, she has quite significant people. Her mother's side - which I think will be very important in her sophisticated understanding of patronage politics - her mother's family was a family called the Hardys, and her uncles were both very involved in British government. Her uncle, Sir Charles Hardy, had been a leading Admiral, and actually would become the governor of New York., and another one of her mother's brothers became the governor of New Jersey. So, these are people who are pretty sophisticated at colonial politics, of British politics, they remind us how important the sort of Atlantic is in this world - we sometimes forget how important this is - and they're also kind of aspiring people.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:13:42](#)

They're trying to raise themselves up through British society through kind of playing this game of appointments. And on her father's side, her father was a man named Benjamin Barons, and to real sort of geeks of American history, they will know that Benjamin Barons was a person who was called "the Demon Port Collector of Boston." He had been put into position by his wife's family as the port collector, and as the port collector in Boston, he had sided basically with the colonists. So, he's important in a whole other understanding. And so, she comes from this family that's sort of aspiring, that's pretty sophisticated, that's sympathetic to expansive notions of constitutional representation, sort of modern in this sense. And she probably very importantly travels with her father. Her mother dies when she's quite young, although I don't think she's in Boston. She probably does go both to New York where her father goes when her uncle is governor of New York, And also then to South Carolina, when her father is appointed Deputy Postmaster in Charleston, in the 1760s. So, she's a person who's pretty sophisticated about traveling.

Liz Covart: [00:14:56](#)

Wow. Eliza did travel quite a bit. I mean, she was born in Portugal, she traveled to New York and Charleston, maybe even Boston, we just don't know; how typical was it for a British woman to be able to travel around the British empire like Eliza did?

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:15:11](#)

Yeah, it's such a great question - you know, she really reminds us of how much mobility there is in this period. Although, you know, some people, for example, you know, James Madison, who I wrote on, right, wasn't particularly well traveled. So many Americans and a number of people on the British side were sort of itinerant also.



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And this will characterize her life. She's a person who basically by the time she dies has been to, she never gets quite to New England, but almost everywhere else she will have traveled to. And, she reminds us of how people who didn't have family connections to a particular locale in this period are pretty mobile. And she really represents that. She's a little bit reminiscent of Linda Colley's wonderful book on Elizabeth Marsh. And so, I think she sort of brings back this world where people sort of kept imagining, "if I move somewhere else, I'll have opportunities."

Liz Covart: [00:16:05](#)

I'm curious about the American Revolution. You mentioned that Eliza was born in 1749. So, if we think about that, she really would've been in her late-teens and early-twenties when the Revolution started. And you mentioned that her father became the port collector of Boston, or that "Demon Port Collector of Boston," and sided with the Revolutionaries. So what did Eliza's life look like as a Briton who seemed to be caught in the American Revolution?

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:16:32](#)

It's so interesting, one of the problems, or challenges, I suppose, of the book is that we have no personal papers from her. So, a lot of this is constructed out of, you know, little, tiny pieces of evidence. So, we don't have firsthand reports from her of how she felt, but we can piece together the fact that her father's removed for sort of not siding with the correct position in the British government, and her uncles also make similarly unfortunate decisions. They're not out-and-out Revolutionaries, but they're people who clearly have sympathies that lie with the idea that people deserve greater representation. And that's one of the points that the book tries to explain, as calling this an Age of the Constitution, thinking about this as the Dawn of the Constitution, is we can understand on both sides of the Atlantic, the Revolution as a particular example of a much larger shift towards people believing that government should represent and be responsible to a greater number of the people, not so much as subjects through the king, but as political actors in their own right.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:17:40](#)

And her family is clearly politically sophisticated enough not to lose their jobs completely over this, but has those type of what we might call in an 18th century word, "liberal" sympathies. She herself probably has those sympathies because in June of 1776, she marries a man who's completely outside her own family's network. She marries a man called John O'Connor, and John O'Connor is



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Irish Catholic he's in London studying at the inns of court, but he really represents a person who's just completely outside of the kind of traditional English, Church of England politics that her family represents. And so, that itself is a pretty radical choice.

Liz Covart: [00:18:23](#)

So, Eliza held these 18th century liberal ideas, ideas that kind of went hand in hand with the American Revolution about government participation and government being more responsive to more and more people. If she's sympathetic to the Revolution, do we know anything about her experience in the Revolution? Did she live in the colonies during the war for American independence? Is that where she met her husband, John O'Connor?

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:18:49](#)

They meet in London in 1776. At this point in time, her family is back in London, so she's not in the United States involved in the Revolution. And her husband comes to London after being in Dublin. And, in the 1770s, the Irish, particularly the Irish Catholics, for the first time begin to experience similar capacity to loosen the kinds of restraints that the British government had placed on the Irish Catholics. And so, in the 1770s, we begin to see the sort of lifting of a lot of the penal restrictions. And in this moment of - particularly people who at least claim to be descended from the ancient Irish kind of royal political power structure - they begin to sort of articulate arguments for reclaiming political power in Ireland. And her husband seems to be sympathetic to this argument. And so, in London, in 1776, they get married. Their marriage is outside of the Church, it's conducted by a person who's clearly aligned with this kind of Irish Catholic sympathies. And it's not clear her family supports it, but very quickly after that, her family basically publishes that the niece of Sir Charles Hardy was married to John O'Connor, an Irish lawyer. And so, there's an effort to sort of patch over whatever feelings that there had been, but her father instantly puts all of his possible inheritance into a trust that John can never touch. And so, there isn't the kind of, "you've married into the family and now you're going to benefit from that."

Liz Covart: [00:20:28](#)

So Eliza really had two different experiences with the British empire. She experienced life in the British North American colonies as the Revolution was breaking out, and she also had this Irish experience through her husband. And scholars always say that if you really want to understand colonization and what happens in



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British North America, then you really need to understand what the British were doing in Ireland.

- Mary Sarah Bilder:** [00:20:53](#) Yeah, and it's such an important point, Liz, that because Ireland, England, the United States develop their own national narrative structures, we forget that in this moment, there's all sorts of continuity among reformers in all of these countries, and connections, and people are sort of borrowing ideas from one person and articulating it to their own circumstance. In fact, her husband, John O'Connor, who has published pieces, will constantly link efforts to liberate Ireland as examples of also the way that America was liberated, but also the way that across the world, people can work for freedom and emancipation against tyrants. So, people are seeing this not only as a national story, but part of a sort of global shift towards representative government.
- Liz Covart:** [00:21:48](#) If Eliza met John O'Connor in London and that's where they married, how and when did she and John arrive in the United States, when did Eliza return to the places of her childhood?
- Mary Sarah Bilder:** [00:21:59](#) They probably spent part of the late 1770s in Dublin, and in Dublin, she becomes introduced to the work of the Sheridans, which will be very important for her educational ideas. In 1786, they moved to New York, and her husband actually may have come over in 1783, 84, right after the war ends. But she actually appears in New York in 1786, and she starts a pretty impressive female school there, young girls' school.
- Liz Covart:** [00:22:30](#) I'm glad you brought up schools, Mary, because schools really seem to be the hallmark of Eliza Harriot and her push for women's participation in politics and representative government. In fact, the school you just mentioned that she established in New York represents just one of the schools that Eliza would establish as she traveled throughout the United States and then established schools in every American city that she lived in. So, Mary, would you tell us more about Eliza's schools and the educational philosophy she founded them on?
- Mary Sarah Bilder:** [00:23:02](#) So, in 1786, she sets up this French and English boarding school in New York City, and she has some of the most politically elite people's daughters at her school. She describes her school in a number of advertisements, and her advertisements actually run in



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papers outside of New York. So, the type of school that she's running in New York becomes very influential through these advertisements. And she describes her school as based on a model of the school she probably attended in Chelsea, and that was a school called Mrs. Alesworthy's. And she would've been a contemporary of John Wilkes and Tobias Smollett's daughter there. So, it was a very liberal school, very enlightened school, a school chosen by politically liberal people. And, in New York, her school has this very ambitious idea of educating young girls in the ways that young boys were educated. One of the things that I found really interesting in my research was that, although we have a very strict idea that college and sort of secondary school academy school might be different, that's not so true in this period.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:24:15](#)

In fact, if you look at the ages of people, for example, graduating from Columbia College, they're significantly younger than we might think. What college really refers to is the type of governing structure that you had from the state. So, when she runs her French and English academy in New York, she ends that year by explaining that there were going to be so many people to see the young girls' examinations that she had to give the examinations at Columbia College. And that at Columbia College, the professors had actually helped examine her young girls. And so not only is she imagining an education that's similar to young boys' education at the college level, she's actually moved her girls into Columbia College to have their public examinations with the Columbia College faculty. And then in classic Eliza Harriot style, she writes all this up in the newspaper. So, the example she provides has enormous amplification outside of just whoever happened to be attending her school.

Liz Covart: [00:25:19](#)

Do we know why Eliza chose schools as a way to help make the argument that women should be able to participate in politics and the constitutional state? Was establishing schools something that she had done in Ireland and decided that she would continue when she moved to the United States, or was this a goal that she thought about while in Ireland and believed that New York would just be a really great city to try out, you know, this intellectual experiment that she had?

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:25:46](#)

It's a great question, I actually don't know the answer to that; I don't know what she did in the 1780s before she shows up in New York. I can follow her in New York because she starts running



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advertisements for this school, but she might have been running a school in Dublin, I just don't know the answer to that. What I do know out of Dublin is that, at the time that she's in Dublin, there is a man called Samuel White, who publicizes a number of books on what comes part of her key educational idea, which is the art of speaking, this sort of belles-lettres curriculum that emphasized public speaking. And he argued that young women, as well as young men would benefit from that kind of education. So, she's clearly exposed to those ideas in Dublin, she was exposed to those ideas when she was a young woman herself, but whether she had engaged herself as a teacher before she comes to New York, I don't know the answer to that.

Liz Covart: [00:26:41](#)

Even though we can't really know a lot about Eliza's activities while she was in Dublin, I suppose it really isn't a surprise that her educational philosophy really went hand-in-hand with Eliza's career as a public speaker. Now, you mentioned at the start of our conversation that Eliza was known for giving a series of lectures in public venues, including the University of Pennsylvania, which is where George Washington heard her speak. Mary, do we know when Eliza started her public speaking career, and what she was speaking about in this series of lectures?

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:27:13](#)

In New York, when she opens her school, she doesn't seem to have first given a public lecture. And that suggests that the idea for public lectures comes to her in New York. And that actually suggests that the person who might have, ironically, inspired this notion of lecturing in order to raise money, might have been Noah Webster, who actually goes on to be somewhat of a competitor of hers. Noah Webster had developed the idea of giving lectures on basically belles-lettres. And he was actually pretty bad at it, and not a particularly interesting lecturer. And he was particularly critical of women in those lectures. In 1787 in the spring, her husband goes to Philadelphia. Philadelphia by the early spring of 1787 is the place everybody wants to be because the Convention is going to be there. And John goes down to become the editor of a magazine, and Eliza Harriot leaves her quite profitable, New York school and moves to Philadelphia.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:28:10](#)

And the first thing she does in Philadelphia is run advertisements saying that she's going to give a course of lectures. The first advertisement doesn't say that it will be at the University Hall, but pretty soon she says she will be the lady lecturing at the University



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Hall. Her lectures are going to be a course of lectures, and this was incredibly important. Granville Ganter, who's the only other person who's written about her, points out that this is a form of lecturing that we could call "entrepreneurial lecturing." The idea is that you give a course of lectures as a subscription, and so, you get the money up front. This means you have to look like you're actually going to give enough lectures that people are willing to pony over the money, but then you have sort of like, a little pile of money that you can use to fund something else. And this will eventually become the way that she funds schools, which is give lectures, make some money, and then use that money to basically begin her school.

Liz Covart: [00:29:07](#)

It really seems like it must have been an uphill battle for Eliza to make money as a public speaker, because while lectures and attending them were a form of education and entertainment in this pre-television and pre-internet era, Eliza was a woman, and people usually paid to go hear men. So, it seems like her giving lectures and performing at public speaking engagements would've been a bit novel in the late-18th century United States.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:29:33](#)

Yeah, it's completely novel as a lecturer. Now, the idea of women speaking in public is not novel - in the period that she was in London in the 1780s, there were women debating societies. And this is a wonderful aspect of history that a lot of people don't know about, although there's quite a bit of scholarship written about it. Women formed debating societies in London, and they ran advertisements with their topics, including the idea that they should participate in politics. So women speak at those debating societies, but they don't give a course of lectures. And as far as I know, Eliza Harriot appears to be the first person, first woman in the United States to advertise and then give a course of lectures. The women who follow her will follow her quite a ways later in this style. So, she's really a remarkable person in the moment in which she speaks. And she probably gives at least five lectures that summer in Philadelphia. In Philadelphia, there are over 150 advertisements in the newspapers relating to her lectures. In fact, a reader in Philadelphia of the newspapers could not but help see, over and over again, that there was a lady lecturing at the university. And that's how all of her ads read. So, she's really putting women both in the space as public orators, and in the space as associated with universities, with higher education.



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- Liz Covart:** [00:30:57](#) So, do we know anything about the course of lectures that Eliza Harriot advertised that she would give? Do we know what issues were so important to Eliza that she felt like, in 1787 she has to go out on the public speaking circuit in Philadelphia to talk about?
- Mary Sarah Bilder:** [00:31:13](#) I think what she thought was so important was the example of a woman speaking in public. I think that's the piece for her that's really significant. And she actually writes about this, she has a whole theory of the female example. She writes that the exertions of a female should be considered as presenting an example to be imitated and improved on by future candidates for literary fame. And that's actually the epigraph of my book, because this is a theory about the power of the female example. And the female example was actually a significant aspect of women's history in this period; one way that women were able to claim that there had always been female geniuses, that women had the capacity to do this, was to point to women in the past, who served as examples. What's so interesting about Eliza Harriot's idea of lecturing as a female example is that she emphasizes the idea of being imitated and improved on by future candidates.
- Mary Sarah Bilder:** [00:32:20](#) So, she never sets herself out as being the perfect example. She always seems to think if she does this, then somebody else will come along and sort of push the project one step further. So, I think for her part of it is to make money - her husband's a completely unsuccessful economic earner - but part of it is actually the idea that if she can get herself out there as an example of female genius, as a woman lecturing in public, then other women will begin to understand that this is something that people have the capacity to do.
- Liz Covart:** [00:32:54](#) Now you told us that the way you found Eliza Harriot was in George Washington's diary while you were reading it to research the Constitutional Convention. And you mentioned that Washington wrote about attending one of Eliza's lectures. And I wonder, did he know anything about his attendance at this lecture, such as what he thought of Eliza as a speaker or what he heard Eliza's speak about?
- Mary Sarah Bilder:** [00:33:16](#) We know that he thought it was, as he put it, "tolerable." And that's a wonderful word. It's a word that us fans of Jane Austin might know is what Mr. Darcy says about Eliza Bennett the first



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time he meets her. And Washington remembered it as being “tolerable,” and “tolerable” means not quite perhaps something you embraced entirely, but in some ways rather acceptable. He attended her lecture and she knew he was going to attend her lecture. She actually delays her lecture one day, presumably because she thinks or has been told that if she waits another day, he will actually show up. And this is where understanding her family's political sophistication really helps us. Washington, in attending her lecture, amplifies her lecture. In fact, the way we know she lectures is because after Washington attends her lecture newspapers across the United States pick up that he attended her lecture, newspapers across the United States publish commentary, probably written by Eliza Harriot and her husband, about Washington's attendance.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:34:27](#)

She basically gets enormous mileage and amplification out of his attendance. In some ways, Washington was very conscious about that. He is one of the most famous people in the United States - other than Benjamin Franklin, he's really the only other person with a national reputation - and so, his choices of what activities he patronizes are super important. In a very important piece that probably Eliza Harriot writes, she compares him in the newspaper to the great classical heroes like Cyrus or Scipio, who had basically helped women. And so, she's very conscious of drawing on Washington's political patronage power for her project, and in some ways we can think Washington is himself perhaps lending a little bit of his patronage to this idea of a lady lecturing. If Washington hadn't been willing to see a lady lecture, I don't think she would've given a second lecture, but by him attending it, particularly with this group of women, he's given a sort of validation to the project.

Liz Covart: [00:35:35](#)

Now I know we would love to know, know whether Eliza realized any positive effects, a Washington effect, if you will, from Washington's attendance. But right now, we need to take a moment and thank our episode sponsor.

Hannah Farber: [00:35:49](#)

Hi, I'm Hannah Farber, I'm an Assistant Professor of History at Columbia University, and my new book, *Underwriters of the United States: How Insurance Shaped the American Founding*, published by the Omohundro Institute, is out now. Insurance is a quirky and strange business that leaves a very light paper trail in formal politics, but insurance has a vast influence on America's commercial affairs. And because of that, insurance has a vast



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influence on American politics. *Underwriters of the United States* talks about the financial machinations that go around a world of warfare, and it's about the kinds of things that national figures are doing in their private lives. National figures like Alexander Hamilton, Robert Morris, Daniel Webster. We're not just looking at what they say in political affairs, we're looking at the whole commercial world that surrounds them, and that makes them money. *Underwriters of the United States* tells that story. Get your copy of *Underwriters of the United States* wherever you buy your books.

Liz Covart: [00:37:00](#)

Mary, did Eliza realize any positive effects from Washington's attendance at her lecture? Did Eliza Harriot start suddenly selling out her lectures and lecture series because Washington had attended one?

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:37:12](#)

I think one of the things that, you know, we have to remember when we think about this period is there's a reality of political power, and in some ways Washington represents that reality. Political power is held by white men, often white men who own enslaved people. And that is the sort of conventional notion of political power, but there's also all sorts of people pushing at the edges of that idea, who aspire to things that are way more expansive. And one of the things that I think is really interesting about the 1770s, 1780s, into the early 1790s, is that it's not yet clear to the people who are aspiring, who are pushing against this pretty traditional notion of conventional white male political power, that they're not going to win. So, one of the things about the book is to really recapture this moment where people with expansive ideas like Eliza Harriot imagine that they're going to actually get political power.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:38:13](#)

And so, I think one thing to understand then in this is if we go back, we can see other ways in which other people are making the same argument. So very importantly, we can see that in the earlier 1780s at Princeton, the Princeton graduation speaker gives a speech at graduation arguing for expansive female education, and for basically women participating in politics. That speech is published in 1786 and 1787. And we can see that was a speech that was attended to by Washington and all of Congress. So, we can begin to put together the fact that these other ideas are floating around at the same moment that Washington and sort of his representation of classical sort of white male political power is. Washington himself seems surprisingly interested in the project, at



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the end of the summer he buys to take home with him to Mount Vernon three books that are clearly related to Eliza Harriot's lectures.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:39:13](#)

One is on the art of speaking, one is James Thompson, a poet that she read who was a very important sort of politically liberal poet, and then a book on modern geography, which is the kind of education she argued. And Washington will support her school when she moves and has a school near Georgetown, and he will actually allow his own school that he supported for young men to admit women. Now, he only thought one woman for every four boys, but still, you know, that was a surprising start. And when he picks a school for his female relatives, he picks a school that looks a lot like Eliza Harriot's ideas.

Liz Covart: [00:39:53](#)

Now I'd like to dig a bit deeper into what Mary has been saying about Americans trying to gain or have realized their political participation in the new United States at this moment of the Constitutional Convention. So when Mary's book *Female Genius*, Mary argues that between the 1770s and 1790s, American men and women both imagined a future where women could participate in the American political process. And that women's participation wasn't just a possibility, but a probability. And evidence exists for Mary's claim. All we need to do is look at New Jersey; in New Jersey, there were laws that allowed women taxpayers to vote. Now, Mary, I find your argument to be really intriguing because it's not really something I've read or heard about before. You know, usually when we talk about women and women's political participation in this period, we go straight from the Constitutional Convention to women being Republican Mothers, or mothers who participated in politics, not by voting or holding any sort of political office, but by raising their sons and daughters to be good American citizens. So, could we talk about this brief moment in 1787, when it looked like women would really get the right to vote throughout the new United States, depending on how Convention delegates amended the Articles of Confederation or drafted a new Constitution? And can we also talk about why this moment isn't something more historians discuss?

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:41:15](#)

Yeah, it's such an interesting thing. I think part of it is the chronology gets knocked off a little bit, and a great book in making that point for me was Rosie Zagari's book, *Revolutionary Backlash*, which is so pathbreaking in, sort of, telling a narrative about the



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way in which the 1790s really become the moment of constriction. So, let me take the two pieces of that a little bit differently, and let me take them a little bit out of order, first talking about the Republican Mother piece, and then we can maybe talk about New Jersey. One of the really exciting moments for me in researching the book was when I realized that the pamphlet and speech given by Benjamin Rush, which is the foundation of the Republican Mother argument, is given as an effort to shut Eliza Harriot down. So, the Republican Mother argument, as it developed over time - and it's really a cartoon version of the very sophisticated way it was originally put forth - is largely based on articulation of how women should be educated by Benjamin Rush.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:42:20](#)

And Benjamin Rush gives that speech in August of 1787 at a school that he was supporting, the Young Ladies' Academy. And that speech, put into the context of the summer of 1787, was designed to oppose this kind of expansive education for female genius that Eliza Harriot was proposing. Eliza Harriot had spent most of the summer running advertisements for a French academy in Philadelphia that would be run by a majority of women, that would have a woman on the board who always gave lectures every two weeks to 200 to 300 people. And her ideas for education are the ideas that Rush articulates as being completely wrong for women in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*. And so, we can see that Rush's idea about what becomes known as Republican Motherhood is actually a conservative response to Eliza Harriot's notions of female genius. Now, Eliza Harriot, even though she gets Washington to show up, doesn't have the kind of political power that Rush has.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:43:26](#)

And so, Rush not only is able to basically drive her out of Philadelphia, but his argument for this constrained type of education becomes dominant. That speech, when you go back and think about it in context, is shocking. Every idea he has about female education is cabined or constrained, and it's all put in context of women being subordinate. And even the lines that we sometimes read as being sort of proto-republican, wonderful American lines, once you realize that they're actually aimed at Eliza Harriot, come off completely differently. So, one of the most famous quoted lines out of that pamphlet is that women can 'become the wife and daughter of an American citizen.' And taken out of context, we think, "oh, that's great, you know, you can become part of this American enterprise," but if we put it back in



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context where he's saying it about a woman who has a British accent, who's married to an Irish Catholic person, who's not an American citizen. We can feel some of the nativist element that goes, and there's actually quite a bit of nativist sentiment in Rush's pamphlet.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:44:34](#)

And we can see how his idea that women only should be educated within this subordinate-to-men-within-the-family idea is so dominant. We can actually tie that to something Eliza Harriot wrote: Eliza Harriot wrote that her idea of being a lady lecturing would show that the female character could basically desert the toilet and the drawing room - the two areas that women were traditionally found - for the forum and the college, for the political space and higher education. And so Rush is actually, in the Republican Mother idea, literally pushing back against this. So, that's one really important way that the rediscovery of Eliza Harriot helps us put Rush in a slightly different space. Now, if we think about New Jersey, New Jersey's such a wonderful example.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:45:34](#)

The fact that women vote in New Jersey, and people of color vote in New Jersey, in this early period has been known for a long time. The great women's historian, Mary Sumner Benson, who wrote a wonderful book in 1935, she talks about the New Jersey example and a number of other people have pointed to the New Jersey example, but everyone's sort of like, "what does that stand for?" And so, actually, the New Jersey example has been sort of pushed out of the canon, so to speak, like, "we can't pay attention to that because that doesn't fit our story." The late Jan Ellen Lewis was really remarkably important in pointing to New Jersey as suggesting the possibility for a different way of understanding the political space around voting. And for me as a constitutional historian, this opened up a whole new way of thinking about the problem. What if we remembered that the idea that the only people who can vote are white men isn't yet inscribed in constitutions.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:46:34](#)

In fact, constitutions in this period tended to emphasize either property holding requirements or religious restrictions. And if we start from that standpoint, we can see that the idea that constitutions and political power should prevent people who aren't white men from voting hasn't yet fully developed or been written into the law. That will happen, but it happens largely on the other side of this period. In fact, if we look at political constitutions from this period, Massachusetts stands out as being one of the few that



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described voters using a gender term. Most constitutions in this period, describe voters in ways that can be read as gender-neutral. And we know that, actually, there are some interesting examples, not just in New Jersey, but in England, of people voting. So, the 1770s is the moment when the first voter of color, Ignatius Sancho, votes in London, because he meets the religious and land holding requirements.

Liz Covart: [00:47:40](#)

I really want us to get into the gender-neutrality of the Constitution because that's another fascinating argument that you make in your book, *Female Genius*, that the Constitution is a gender neutral document. But before we get into that in this day and age, we often look for people that we can credit with things and who we can blame when something turns out a way that we don't like it too. So, in this moment in the 1780s, when many Americans thought it was probable that women would be active participants in the political life of the early Republic, was Benjamin Rush the only person to push back on the idea of women's political participation in this real public way? Is he the person that we in the 21st century can think about blaming for the fact that it would take until 1920 for women to get the right to vote?

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:48:25](#)

Oh yeah, wouldn't that be nice to be able to blame a person? No, I don't think he can be blamed; his political pamphlet gets mileage because it fits what obviously a lot of people probably believed. I say in the book, "who knows, if there were polls, maybe most of them would've sided with Rush," but that's different than understanding that Rush represents the only way the political system could be understood. Very importantly, the other person who is often cited as sort of supporting the Republican Mother idea as it sort of expands is Noah Webster, and Noah Webster actually heard Eliza Harriot speak. He heard her twice, and he recorded her in his diary as being "dull." And this is not surprising because I read Noah Webster's diary and every time he goes to hear a woman, he's critical. In fact, he's critical of almost every other speaker. We have to remember that Noah Webster is quite young in this period, and when he himself had given lectures in Philadelphia, they had been a disaster.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:49:21](#)

So, to watch a person seemed to be far more successful than him was probably somewhat inspiring of a certain jealousy. And for Rush, I think part of it is just the economic realities; he's supporting a school that is supported by the Episcopal



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establishment, that imagined its role as creating women to be somewhat subordinate and to understand their place, and suddenly a woman shows up with this very ambitious, sort of French style, English style education, and that really threatens to undercut the Young Ladies' Academy entirely. One of the really wonderful ways that this story then allows us to tie other pieces of evidence that we know pretty well together is, people may know that there's this wonderful speech in 1793 by Priscilla Mason, who's a young girl at the Young Ladies' Academy.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:50:19](#)

It's a pretty famous speech, and it shows up on like the APUSH test for high school students. And she actually gives the speech at the Young Ladies' Academy. Carolyn Eastman, who writes about young female speakers, points out that it's really one of the most remarkable speeches in this period. And, she's in a room filled with people, probably like Benjamin Rush, she's of the age that she could have heard Eliza Harriot, sort of five or six years earlier, or heard about Eliza Harriot. And she says, "supposing we possessed all the talents of the orator, where shall we find a theater for the display of them? The church, the bar, the Senate are shut against them. Who shut them? Man, despotic man." And then she adds, "let us, by suitable education, qualify ourselves for those high departments, they will open before us." And so, I love the idea of this young woman, sort of, almost thumbing her nose at Rush and all of those arguments at the very school that he basically helped to found.

Liz Covart: [00:51:24](#)

Okay. So, we can't blame Rush that it took so long for women to get the right to vote. Now, to turn back to the gender-neutral language of the Constitution; Mary, you argue in your book, *Female Genius*, the United States Constitution that was drafted in 1787 has gender-neutral language, that the language in the Constitution doesn't just pertain to men or white men. Would you tell us more about your research on the Constitution's language and how you've come to see the Constitution's language as gender-neutral?

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:51:53](#)

Yeah, so let me just emphasize that I'm not an originalist, and so, I believe that the Constitution in this period is as much a system of government as a piece of paper, and that the idea of the Constitution is expansive. So, this isn't an argument about what the original intent is, but it's an argument about how the words chosen, show us a possible openness to the idea that a larger group of people could participate in the political state. And when we look at



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the drafts of various aspects of the Constitution, there are words that describe sex or gender. And so, Jan Ellen Lewis has pointed out that the Three-Fifths Clause originally refers to sex in describing the participants in the political state. Congress is actually originally described as “two bodies of men.” And then very importantly, the draft of the Fugitive Slave Clause originally said “he or she,” and I think that's such an important testament to African American enslaved women's agency, that the man who proposed that language could not even propose that language without, in his mind, seeing women escaping.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:53:14](#)

And so, it's a really remarkable moment where we hear people like Oney Judge, who will escape from Washington, literally being present inside the room through this very explicit use of “she.” But when the final document emerges in September, all of those references to gender have disappeared. And the document itself has become, quite fascinatingly, uniformly gender neutral. It uses a phraseology in which people are described as “persons,” and the pronoun that goes along with that is “he.” Now, “he” to us is a gendered pronoun, but it's not in the 18th century. We actually know that from the Constitution itself, because article four, which says that if you commit a crime, you can be returned to another state uses “that person, he,” and if “person, he” does not refer to all people, then those of us who are not “he's” can commit a lot of crimes and never have to be returned across state lines.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:54:19](#)

So, this is this way in which the Constitution arguably opens itself to the possibility that the people who could participate in the constitutional state were not men. And I think this is really important. In fact, the longer I've thought about this, the more important I think it is; they had a model of using the word “male” that was in the Massachusetts Constitution. And, there was a decision not to describe every actor as male. Why did they do that? Well, we don't know exactly, but the fact that in Philadelphia in 1787, there was this remarkable person reminding people that women could be political actors, that they could go to education, that they had equal capacity - that may explain why the Constitution as an instrument is open to that possibility.

Liz Covart: [00:55:17](#)

To shift from this broadened conversation about the Constitution and the constitutional moment to get back to Eliza. You mentioned that John O'Connor, Eliza's husband, was really not a good breadwinner, and that Eliza really had to fulfill this role for



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her and her family. You also mentioned that to accomplish this feat of becoming breadwinner, Eliza opened schools, and she offered her courses of lectures. Could you tell us any more about Eliza's story? Did Eliza experience enough success in Philadelphia or elsewhere that she really was able to travel as a public speaker and open more schools for young women?

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:55:53](#)

Yeah, she's the primary breadwinner for their family. They don't have children, or if they had children, they died in London, and so, she's unusual in the sense that she lives most of her life in a world that really emphasized children, without children. So, she doesn't have children, her husband always has really fabulous ideas of ways to make money, wanting to write books and do things, and he's never successful at all. So, she is always the person who's the primary breadwinner for them. And she reminds us, a lot, of how that is not a typical thing among white women, married women, in this period. So, her husband also is very itinerant and that may be because they're fleeing debts, they may run up debts and then have to move across state lines. And so, the story of her life is one where she leaves Philadelphia in the fall of 1787, and they continually travel southward.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:56:47](#)

They travel along a road that was referred to as the King's Highway. And she sort of continually is moving from place to place giving lectures, if she finds enough people setting up a school, and then, probably because of her husband's debts or other ambitions, she has to move on. So, it's a complicated story for me as a historian because her most successful school will be in Charleston in the 1790s, the early 1790s. And she has a very ambitious school in Charleston. And thinking about her location in Charleston, where she probably lived as a young girl, really forces us to think about the ways in which some of her ideas about female education, some of the ways in which she perpetually describes herself as a lady, were ways that were traded on sort of her whiteness, that in Charleston where being white, being seen to be elite, being seen to be connected to England had a real value, her educational model is more successful.

Liz Covart: [00:57:52](#)

Mary, now that you have successfully uncovered and recovered the life and story of Eliza Harriot, and as you think about the wealth of information you already know about constitutions and American Constitution-making, where do you think we should fit Eliza's legacy into this larger story of constitutions, Constitution-making,



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and particularly about the creation of the United States Constitution?

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:58:15](#)

Well, I think there's two really important things, you know, one is to see that her story and her life actually maps perfectly onto a story that's developing about the 1790s being a moment where we get this rise of what we might think of as a white male democracy, but at the cost of a larger democracy. And so, her story really fits with this narrative in which a sort of ambiguous or open contingent moment in the 1780s is followed, after 1792, by the rise of what eventually become a white male citizen-defined notion of politics. And that's when constitutions, this sort of new genre, really begin to be powerful in inscribing that in a form that becomes very difficult to get rid of, and it will take, you know, like the 14th and 15th Amendments and then the 19th Amendment to change that. So, that's one aspect of her story is it reminds us that instead of sort of expanding democracy, we have this rise of a white male democracy in the 1790s into the early 19th century, and then the efforts to change that back.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [00:59:22](#)

I think another thing her story really emphasizes is how education in this period was part of an understanding about the constitutional state. Mary Wollstonecraft and Catherine McAuley, who are the two greatest political thinkers for women in England in this exact period, both write books emphasizing female education as an aspect of women developing political power. And so, it allows us to understand education, not as something outside of sort of constitutional politics, but as something at the very foundation of constitutional politics. I think that allows us to think about the expansion of education in this period in ways that connect it with the story about, sort of, who can participate in the political state.

Liz Covart: [01:00:14](#)

Do you have a sense why, when we look at political participation and the rights and freedoms granted by the United States Constitution, why those rights always seem to come at the cost of somebody else's rights and ability to participate in American government? And I ask this because we've been talking about the 1780s, and how it could have been this period at the founding where the Constitution could have been more inclusive than it actually turned out to be. And of course, we'll see this again after the American Civil War where abolitionists advocated for the political participation and inclusion of Black men, and their participation and inclusion seem to come at the expense of the



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political participation and inclusion of all women. So, throughout history, it just always seems like when one group wins and achieves more political power, another group is losing political power.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [01:01:03](#)

Yeah, I don't know what the historical explanation is. I think that in the 1780s, those lines aren't clear yet. There's people in this period who imagine the ending of the slave trade, they imagine participation of people of color as citizens, as participants in the constitutional state. I do think there's a moment where those lines that will become so much part of the American political system aren't yet hardened in stone in the way that they will be. I think a lot of it has to do with this rise, in this new genre of written constitutions, of this descriptor of the political participant as a white male citizen. And that first appears in 1792 in the Federal Militia Act - it's not completely binding there, but that's one of the first places we can track it - and then it appears in all sorts of state constitutions, and then through Congress into the ways that the Northwest territories will be formed.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [01:02:02](#)

And I think the minute that the person who's getting to participate is described along lines of race, of gender, and of citizenship, we begin to have people thinking those are the vectors on which you can include or exclude people. And so, I think in, in a funny way, the divisions that we sometimes see get formed in this notion that the person who participates is a white male citizen. That probably has a lot to go back to the rise of the Democratic Party under Thomas Jefferson. If we look at New Jersey, we can see a small example of this. So, in New Jersey, where women and people of color voted from the 1790s through to 1807, when they are disenfranchised, women and people of color tended to vote against the Democratic Party, and that was partly why they were disenfranchised. In fact, the arguments for changing the New Jersey Constitution to only allow white male citizen voters is that there was "voter fraud."

Mary Sarah Bilder: [01:03:02](#)

And what they argued was that you couldn't tell whether women were married or not, you couldn't tell whether a Black person was still an enslaved laborer or not. And so, they pushed through, using voter fraud, this sort of argument about only white men should be allowed to vote. And the minute that idea that it's more important to disenfranchise people than to enfranchise them gets going in a two-party system, I think there just becomes a lot of ways in which political power than turns into a story about exclusion. One of the



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things that the New Jersey example I think is really wonderful about is, it allows us to imagine moments in the past where the sort of dynamics of the current moment don't yet operate. And I think that's really important for us,

Liz Covart: [01:03:52](#)

Mary, as you know, September is the month we celebrate Constitution day in honor of the creation of the United States Constitution. So, I wonder what you think we can do with our newfound knowledge that the Founders and Framers of the Constitution seriously considered the ideas of women and their political participation in the American political process during the moment of the Constitution's birth.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [01:04:14](#)

I think it's really important to understand this distinction between the way that the Constitution as a system of government was used by people who took power under it to further their own power, and the way in which the Constitution as an aspirational set of ideas allowed other people to make other kinds of arguments. I think it's really dangerous when we create a notion of this period, which is overly rigid, in which only one side occupied all the space. That's not to deny the realities of political power in this period, but it's so important in history to remember these examples. You know, Eliza Harriot had this notion that every example of a female trying to push against boundaries was an example to be imitated and improved on. And I think there's a way of thinking about history, particularly the history of the early Constitution, in which we can see that there might have been aspirations that were possible in that period that could be imitated and improved on. In fact, that's a way to think about the whole history of the Constitution in this period, is that, there were ideas that people thought were aspirational - ideas like equality, or ideas of liberty.

Mary Sarah Bilder: [01:05:38](#)

And even if they hadn't quite been rendered in the way that we might have wanted in one moment, that idea had the capacity to be improved on. That's a very, almost, sort of traditional notion of some sorts of history, but there's a way in which for many people who were outside the constitutional state, that was an important sort of memory to hold. It was a way of imagining oneself as always holding out the possibility that the political work one did in the current moment would result in an improved situation for future generations. And for me, I think that's a really important lesson from this period. Eliza Harriot, she vanishes completely, but her presence giving lectures, her advertisements, which lots of



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people read - we just don't know how many people she inspired. She's not a perfect example; she was probably annoying and pretty difficult, she had the audacity to tell Washington he had to send a carriage for her to come visit Mount Vernon, but she was pretty remarkable in the way she stood as example of somebody who pushed against the boundaries of her own society.

Liz Covart: [01:06:52](#)

We should move into the time warp. This is a fun segment of the show where we ask you a hypothetical history question about what might have happened if something had occurred differently, or someone had acted differently.

In your opinion, Mary, what might have happened if George Washington had never attended Eliza Harriot's lecture? What do you think we'd know about Eliza Harriot today if that was the case, and how do you think the United States Constitution would've been written in styled without the ideas that Eliza Harriot spoke about?

Mary Sarah Bilder: [01:07:44](#)

Oh, what a great question. I think, first of all, she would've made sure that didn't happen; I think she was incredibly stubborn and persistent, and she would've kept giving or delaying a lecture until, by hook or crook, she had managed to get Washington in the room. I think she was completely determined to have him show up. I think if they hadn't crossed paths, if, let's pretend, he was sick and never showed up in Philadelphia, I think it's possible that you can imagine a Constitution which might have had the word "male" written into it. You know, the Constitution is interesting in the fact that the power structures that become so terribly pernicious for people of color and for women, aren't completely obvious on the face. I've never known if it would've been better or worse for the Constitution to have been explicit about this, but the fact that those words aren't there does allow a number of generations of people to imagine themselves as political participants in theory, and that may be a very important part of our history. So, I'm glad that Washington went along with Mary Morris to hear a lecture that Eliza Harriot was smart enough to write lots of newspaper advertisements, explaining how he had seen them. And I was able to use the wonderful new digital newspaper collections to rediscover her.



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- Liz Covart:** [01:09:09](#) So, Mary, you've uncovered and recovered the life of Eliza Harriot, so what are you researching and writing about now?
- Mary Sarah Bilder:** [01:09:15](#) Well, partly I'm working on this idea of the framing generation, of thinking about people who were present, particularly in the summer of 1787 in Philadelphia, who would have influenced, or allow us to see the system of government differently. So, one example of that is I wrote a piece recently rediscovering four representatives of Native nations who are there that summer, and who actually shake Washington's hand in a very public way. I'm really interested with the Revolution, the 250th approaching, of thinking about the Constitution Convention's relationship to the Revolution. I'm so struck by the fact that for Washington in the summer of 1787, it was the 10th anniversary of the disastrous Philadelphia campaign that ended with the British getting Philadelphia and Washington sort of retreating to Valley Forge. And so, I'm beginning to think about, in what ways can we think about that summer as an effort to recover, to memorialize, to think about the Revolution. And one of the interesting things about Washington's diary that summer is he goes to visit a number of people who were Loyalists, or who had stood on the other side of the Revolution. And I'm beginning to think about, in some ways, did Washington experience that summer as a way to reflect on the Revolution?
- Liz Covart:** [01:10:42](#) And what is the best way for us to reach out if we have questions?
- Mary Sarah Bilder:** [01:10:46](#) Oh yeah, I'm easy to get, I'm at Boston College Law School, I have a pretty easy email, easily found on the website there, and I love to hear from readers and listeners of your show!
- Liz Covart:** [01:10:57](#) Mary Sarah Bilder, thank you for introducing us to Eliza Harriot, and for helping us better understand the moment in which the United States Constitution was written.
- Mary Sarah Bilder:** [01:11:06](#) Thanks, Liz, it's always such a pleasure to talk to you.
- Liz Covart:** [01:11:09](#) When we take a step back from the words and ideas written on the parchment that is the United States Constitution, we can begin to see the ideas, debates, and times that really shaped and gave birth to those written ideas and words. As Mary related, early Americans had a lot of aspirational ideas when it came to who would and



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Episode 339: Mary Sarah Bilder, Women and the Constitutional Moment of 1787

could be included in the United States's new constitutional state. The notion that only white men should be politically active and hold political power was not a settled issue in 1787. In fact, it was so unsettled, the Framers of the Constitution wrote their new system of government with language that allowed for the inclusion of all sorts of Americans - white men, free people of color, and women. And the reason we see this inclusive language is because of the work of men and women like Eliza Harriot - everyday Americans who advocated for their inclusion in the new American constitutional state.

Liz Covart: [01:12:01](#)

And this is something we should remember as Mary told us, just because the rise of Jeffersonian Republicans and their ideas that only white men should be politically active and hold political power began to take hold in 1792, doesn't mean that the framers of the Constitution, or even all Americans, believed in those ideas. In fact, as we just heard, Eliza Harriot, and even George Washington, didn't support those ideas. So, for those who wanted to see and achieve the more broad political inclusion that they saw written into the Constitution, well, they would work debate and advocate for that inclusion from the achievement of independence in 1783, into our own present day. The words of the Constitution matter, and to best understand those words, their meaning, and their intent, we need to take a step or two back from those words, and look at the world in which they were created and set to paper. The times in which we live always impact how we view the world and how we act in it.

Liz Covart: [01:12:58](#)

And this holds true not only for us in the present day, but for every generation who came before us.

Look for more information about Mary, her book, *Female Genius*, plus notes and links and a transcript for everything we talked about today on the show notes page, benfranklinworld.com/339. Friends tell friends about their favorite podcasts, so if you enjoyed this episode of *Ben Franklin's World*, please tell your friends and family about it. This episode of *Ben Franklin's World* is supported by an American Rescue Plan Grant to the Omohundro Institute, from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Production assistance for this podcast comes from the Omohundro Institute's digital audio team: Joseph Adelman, Holly White, Nyree Dowdy, and Dylan Holzer. Breakmaster Cylinder composed our custom theme music. This podcast is part of the AirWave Media podcast



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network. To discover and listen to their other podcasts, visit airwavemedia.com. Finally, what are your ideas about the United States Constitution? Do you think knowing more about the context of its creation helps us better understand the words and intent of the document? I'm curious what you think. So let me know - Liz at benfranklinworld.com. *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of the Omohundro Institute, and is sponsored by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.