The purpose of this paper is to explore the life and writings of revolutionary poet Margaretta Faugeres (1771-1801). As a child, her life was radically altered by the events of the American Revolution. As an adult, Faugeres used the memory of destruction in the American and French Revolutions to express her political convictions concerning democracy, slavery, and women’s intellectual capabilities. Although she has received relatively little academic attention, Faugeres’ writings nonetheless are valuable to understanding the role of personal experience in the development of female political consciousness during the American Revolution. Through an exploration of Faugeres’ commemorative poetry, this paper will examine her blending of revolutionary history and contemporary politics.

Recalling her family’s experiences during the Revolutionary War, American poet Margaretta Bleecker Faugeres wrote, “The clamorous thunders of War frightened them from their peaceful dwelling, and the blasted hand of Desolation dispersed them as a flock in the desert.”1 In 1777, the Bleecker family was forced to flee from its home in the New York countryside. Running from British troops, the flight ended with the death of Abella, Margaretta’s infant sister. Overwhelmed by the tragedy, Margaretta’s mother, Ann Eliza, suffered a mental collapse from which she never fully recovered. Four years later, British forces held Margaretta’s father captive for six days, a period of unspeakable terror for the Bleecker women. Following his safe return and the war’s end, the reunited family journeyed to New York City in search of comfort from familiar sites and faces. Instead, the Bleeckers encountered a devastated city and news of the deaths of dear friends. Margaretta Faugeres would later describe her mother’s shock at seeing her native city “moldering fast beneath the relentless hand of Time and War.”2 Losing all hope, Ann Eliza suffered a final mental collapse and died.3

The Revolutionary War left Margaretta’s family forever altered. From childhood, the costs of war and revolution were interwoven with the very fabric of her life. As an adult, Margaretta Faugeres would attempt to make sense of the memory and meaning of revolutions in her poetry. Using a history which was both deeply intimate and decidedly national, Faugeres found a political voice in a very personal memory of the past.

While research on Faugeres herself is sparse, historians have thoroughly analyzed the broader context in which she lived. Of importance to her story is the rise of fierce political partisanship during the 1790s. As Federalists and Democratic-Republicans emerged with differing views of the nation’s future, political parties and their supporters increasingly turned to the past to legitimize their visions for the nation’s future.4 Accordingly, Faugeres was one of many voices expressing her hopes for the nation’s political future through the memory of the past. Concurrently, this decade saw the expansion of opportunities for women to express themselves politically. Historian Rosemarie Zagarri, for instance, has argued that political partisanship created a more favorable environment for female activity in the press and the public sphere.5 Understood in this context, Faugeres’ writings are just one example of an expanding body of women’s political literature. Similarly, literary scholar Sharon M. Harris, the only academic to have significantly assessed Margaretta Faugeres’ writings, casts her as a chief representative of late eighteenth-century activist women.6 Harris argues that women like Faugeres adopted the writing of histories, as it allowed them to discuss contemporary political events while projecting a facade of objectivity and civic virtue to concerned readers.7

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**“O, Desolating War!”**

However, in this article, I will argue that Faugeres’ poetry should be understood as essentially personal. In writing about the revolutionary past, Faugeres used her personal memories of the American Revolution to comment on contemporary political issues. Historians have failed to fully explore the role of personal experience in the development of female political consciousness during the American Revolution. In an attempt to recover this missing perspective, this article will examine the political convictions of Margaretta Faugeres in relation to her personal experience with the destruction caused by the American Revolution.

From 1790 to 1798, Margaretta Faugeres wrote six commemorative poems celebrating the spirit of revolution in both America and France. In her works, Faugeres used powerful events of the past to express her hopes for the political future, including advocating for greater democracy, an end to slavery, and increased educational opportunities for women. She did this by emphasizing the aspect of revolutions she understood most: their destructiveness. However, her poetry also looked forward in hope, finding in the wreckage of revolutions the chance to reimagine the future political state of the American nation. This article examines Faugeres’ poem on the French Revolution, titled “On seeing a print, exhibiting a View of the Ruins of the Bastille,” followed by a more detailed analysis of her most famous poem on the American Revolution, “The Hudson.” Using these poems as textual evidence, this article explores Margaretta Faugeres’ deeply personal accounts of the devastating power of revolutions. Furthermore, it explores the fundamental connection between these descriptions and Margaretta Faugeres’ argument for the construction of a new political reality.

**THE RUINS OF BASTILLE: FAUGERES AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION**

Soon after the death of her mother, Margaretta and her father took up permanent residence in New York City. As a young adult in New York City, Margaretta saw and commented on the rebuilding of the ruined city and the rise of new political debates over the nation’s future. In 1791, the publishers of *The New-York Magazine* sent out a request for original works by female authors for their column “The American Muse.”

Answering their call, Faugeres became a regular contributor to one of the longest-running periodicals of the late eighteenth century. New York City was a hotbed of political activity throughout the 1790s, and Faugeres addressed many of the city’s major debates in her poetry, including the French and American Revolutions, slavery, and women’s education. The Revolutionary War had a contradictory effect on Faugeres’ life; while the American Revolution decimated the life Faugeres knew as a child, it also made possible the life and career she came to know in New York City.

Faugeres’ first poem on the French Revolution, titled “On seeing a print, exhibiting a View of the Ruins of the Bastille,” celebrated the historic fall of the Bastille. Unlike the American Revolution, the French Revolution held personal implications for Faugeres. In 1792, Margaretta fell in love with Peter Faugeres, a French physician. The couple married on Bastille Day, signaling a devotion to the cause of the French Revolution that would persist throughout Margaretta’s life.

Beyond her personal connection to the cause, the French Revolution was also important to Margaretta because it was a subject of considerable debate in the New York press. As noted by historians Alfred Young and Simon Newman, the French Revolution was controversial in the United States. To the Federalists, the destabilizing power of the French Revolution, as exemplified by the execution of King Louis XVI and the subsequent Reign of Terror, was an illustration of the dangers of democracy. On the other hand, Democratic-Republicans believed the French Revolution’s call to liberty and equality was worth emulating, despite its more bloody events. Opinions on the legitimacy of the French Revolution in 1790s America were intimately connected to concerns over the future of American politics. Margaretta inserted herself into this debate when she submitted her poem “On seeing a print, exhibiting a View of the Ruins of the Bastille” for publication in the *New York Magazine* in 1792.

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**“However, her poetry also looked forward in hope, finding in the wreckage of revolutions the chance to reimagine the future political state of the American nation.”**

Adopting the framework of the historical narrative, Faugeres recounted the violent fall of the Bastille in this poem. During the eighteenth century, the Bastille served as a French armory and state prison. Largely viewed as a symbol of monarchical power, the fortress was stormed in 1789 by a mob of French commoners, in what is considered a watershed moment of the French Revolution. Extolling the event, Faugeres wrote, “Ah! see the Bastille’s iron walls thrown down, / That bulwark strong of Tyranny; / See her proud turrets smoke along the ground, / Crush’d by the giant arm of Liberty!” In this description, the Bastille’s tyranny is portrayed as being overthrown by the unbridled power of the people. Faugeres depicts liberty as a crushing power that destroys...
institutions of tyranny, leaving nothing of the past but smoke and rubble. Later in the poem, Faugeres again described liberty in destructive terms, this time as a flame. Praying for the future of Europe, she asked that liberty would “Extend its prolific rays, / Enveloping neighboring empires in the blaze.” In this picturesque analogy, Faugeres visualized the expansion of liberty into the monarchical nations of Europe as a fire spreading across the continent. Using the imagery of fire, Faugeres described liberty as both an annihilating and purifying force.

It is probable that Faugeres’ own violent experience of the Revolutionary War informed her understanding of liberty as a fierce power. Additionally, her life in a rebuilt New York City and her participation in a thriving political arena can explain the hopefulness with which she wrote of war’s desolation. Faugeres’ presentation of the violence of liberty is not written in an entirely negative manner. Rather, its decimation seems to create a blank slate upon which new, more democratic nations can be built. The obliteration of the Bastille and the picture of an overturned Europe are hopeful images of a better, freer future. Upon the smoldering blaze of the Bastille, the people rise ready to transmit their hard-won liberty to the world beyond. Her support of the French Revolution within the context of the 1790s reveals her advocacy for the expansion of democracy within the United States. Rather than portraying violence as an unfortunate side effect of the French Revolution, Faugeres displayed an acute confidence concerning the role of demolition in the achievement of liberty and equality.

O DESOLATING WAR!: FAUGERES AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

A year later, the Swords brothers, two acclaimed New York publishers, published Faugeres’ seminal poem on the American Revolution, “The Hudson.” Within this poem, Faugeres journeyed from the themes of suffering and devastation to redemption and hope. Eighteen pages long, “The Hudson” follows the course of the Hudson river, and echoes Faugeres’ own journey from her childhood home in the Albany countryside to New York City. She describes moments of victory such as the capture of Ticonderoga and the Battle of Saratoga, as well as moments of great defeat. Large portions of the poem are dedicated to examining the costs of war, including a description of the murder of Jane McCrea and the burning of the town of Esopus, New York. The tension between the destructive and creative powers of war, as well as its connection to her own life, is felt throughout the poem.
Faugeres' images of the American Revolution are far from glorious, with many of her scenes depicting moments of trial and anguish. For example, in “The Hudson,” she tells the story of Jane McCrea, who, on the way to meet her fiancé, was murdered by Indians under the command of Britain's General Burgoyne. The largely fictional story of McCrea's death was popularized by the patriot press during the Revolution to villainize Britain's alliances with native Indians. The inherent sadness of this tale seems to be related to a loss of innocence, with the virgin bride being murdered at the savage's hands. Faugeres vividly described Jane's fiancé coming upon her ruined body, bending, “to kiss the clotted gore.”

One cannot help but wonder at Margaretta's own psychological loss of innocence following her experiences during the American Revolution. In this story, Faugeres examined the dangers war presented to women in frontier regions, dangers that she and her mother had felt.

Paralleling her description of the Bastille's fall, Faugeres returned to the themes of fire and ruin in “The Hudson.” She did this by describing the burning of the city of Esopus by the British in 1777. Bringing the poem to a climax, she wrote, “O Hudson! O Hudson! From thy frightened shore / Thou saw'st the bursting flame mount to the sky.”

Speaking of the plight of the people, she wrote, “Here a distracted widow wrings her hands, / While grief too keen forbid her tears to flow: / There all aghast a wretched parent stands, / Viewing his beggared babies in speechless woe!”

Painful similarities lie between these descriptions of helpless parents and wasting babies, and Faugeres' own experience of seeing her sister die in her mother's arms. Amidst this account, Faugeres asked the essential question of her poem. “Why did thy hand, O desolating War! / Thy bloody banner o'er our land unfurl?”

With emotional language, Faugeres questioned the very nature of war and revolution. Having personally experienced the war, the search for meaning is understandable.

Following her accounts of the physical destruction of cities and peoples, Faugeres ended “The Hudson” with her vision for the American nation's future. The themes of devastation and creation, first addressed in her poetry on the French Revolution, appear in this text as well. In both poems, Faugeres imagined the destructive powers of revolution as offering peoples and nations the opportunity to create a new world. In “The Hudson,” the theme of new beginnings can be seen in her descriptions of the rebirth of commerce in New York and the “phoenix-like” reconstruction of New York City. The devastation of the war, in Faugeres' work, ushers in a period of physical improvement.

However, her emphasis on the new birth of the American nation was not limited to physical infrastructure. Following her discussion of the reborn New York City, Faugeres finished her poem by analyzing the moral and political transformation of American citizens. She wrote, “Led by the hand of Truth, may they [Americans] attain / The height for which have thousands figh'd in vain.” In these lines, Faugeres reasoned that the depths of the war's costs necessitated a higher calling for the American people. In the same way new cities were built upon former ruins, Faugeres argued that the American people needed to emerge from the revolution ready to create a new political order.

In her vision of this new American nation, Faugeres hoped for an end to slavery. She implored Americans not to retain “one slave beneath the cruel yoke” while they “boast yourselves 'the virtuous free.'” Acknowledging the irony between the Revolution's call to liberty and the reality of slavery, Faugeres condemned slavery as a practice no longer in step with the ideals of the American nation. This was not the first time she had addressed the issue of slavery. In 1791, Faugeres wrote an essay titled “Fine Feelings Exemplified in the Conduct of a Negro Slave.” In this essay, Faugeres used a humanizing story of a slave named Mingo to undermine Thomas Jefferson's contrary assertion that African Americans lacked basic human emotions. In looking to the future, Faugeres imagined a nation free of slavery and the false arguments which supported the institution.
Faugeres also addressed the future of women, demanding that America be a land where “no despot's iron laws confin'd / Enjoying the vast freedom of the mind.”27 Faugeres affirmed the intellectual capacity of women and encouraged them to display their cognitive abilities. During the latter years of her life, she would further demonstrate her encouragement of female education by taking on teaching positions at girls' schools. In the following lines, she wrote, “[m]ay thy fair daughters Wisdom's laws obey,” and, “skill'd in pious lore, to all display / 'Tis not in beauty they alone excel.”28 In her analysis, Faugeres emphasized the power of virtue and knowledge for women. This attitude toward female education was consistent with that of many prominent authors of the 1790s, namely Judith Sargent Murray. Following the Revolution, Murray and others called for the education of women by propagating the theory of Republican Motherhood.29 The central argument of this theory was that the future success of the American republic was dependent on an educated and virtuous citizenry. Furthermore, these authors reasoned that it was mothers who were responsible for the education and moralization of their children, and thus the instruction of these women was of utmost important to the state of the next generation.30 Tapping into this concern over the future, Faugeres advocated for the education of women as a necessary component of the new American nation.

Mirroring her poetry on the French Revolution, Faugeres engaged with the themes of ruin and reconstruction in “The Hudson.” In so doing, Faugeres justified her own political convictions as the natural outgrowth of the violent rebirth of the American nation. By linking the revolutionary past with the transformation of the American landscape and citizenry, Faugeres found meaning in the painful remembrance of the American Revolution.

“By linking the revolutionary past with the transformation of the American landscape and citizenry, Faugeres found meaning in the painful remembrance of the American Revolution.”

DESTRUCTION AND REBIRTH: FAUGERES’ REVOLUTION
Although historians have largely overlooked the life and literature of Margareta Faugeres, the record of her life and writings presents a fresh perspective to understanding the human experience of revolutions, and the American Revolution specifically. As a child, the American Revolution exacted damage on Margareta and those closest to her, drastically altering the course of her life. The theme of the Revolution's destructiveness would remain present throughout her works. Additionally, the rise of her own career alongside the creation of the American nation likely affected her writing. With hope, Margareta Faugeres looked to the past and to the future, finding in ruin the ability to start anew. Using narratives and language that highlighted the devastating nature of the revolutionary past, Faugeres emphasized the need for greater democracy, an end to slavery, and the intellectual freedom of women in the creation of a new nation. Margareta Faugeres' revolution was one of loss and decimation, but also one of hope and rebirth.

“‘The Hudson’ is perhaps the most poignant of Faugeres’ works. Even in the telling of a national story, Faugeres’ sense of place and emphasis on turmoil were deeply connected with her personal experience of the war. By ascribing meaning to the destructiveness of the American Revolution, Faugeres synthesized her own violent past with the social and political future she desired. It was the passion and the pain of war and revolution that for her provided the opportunity for a new nation. Engaging with popular debates over slavery and women's education, Faugeres used the memory of the American Revolution's cost as a tool for defining the nation's future. “‘The Hudson’ reveals the degree to which Faugeres'
“O, Desolating War!”

Endnotes

[13] Harris, Executing Race, 120.