

The Female Soldier

Women often followed their husbands in the Continental Army. These women, known as camp followers, often tended to the domestic side of army organization, washing, cooking, mending clothes, and providing medical help when necessary.

Each woman had their own motivations for following the armies: most were the wives, daughters or mothers of male soldiers and wanted to stay close to their loved ones. Others did so in order to provide for themselves, looking for food and protection because they were no longer able to support themselves after their men left for war. (Battlefields)

Sometimes they were inadvertently flung into the battle. There are known cases of women who chose to actively join the armies as fighting soldiers. One of the most famous of these women was Deborah Sampson. (Battlefields)

The eldest of seven siblings, she was born on December 17, 1760, in Plympton, Massachusetts, Sampson grew up in poverty. Her father abandoned the family when Sampson was five.

She was sent to live with relatives until the age of ten, when they could no longer afford to care for her. She was then forced to become an indentured servant to the Thomas family in Middleborough, Massachusetts.

As an indentured servant, she was bound to serve the Thomas family until she came of age at eighteen. In exchange for serving them, she was given food, clothing, and shelter. Once she was free, she supported herself by teaching and weaving.

In the early-1780s, Sampson first tried to disguise herself in men's clothing and enlist in the military. She was rebuffed. In his diary, Abner Weston (a corporal in the Massachusetts militia) describes how Sampson's cross-dressing scandalized their town:

"Their hapend a uncommon affair at this time, for Deborah Samson of this town dress her self in men's cloths and hired her self to Israel Wood to go into the three years Servis. But being found out returnd the hire and paid the Damages."

Sampson's motivations for attempting to take up arms remain unclear. Patriotism may have been a driving factor, but the promise of money may have also played a role; towns that were unable to fill their recruitment quotas during the waning years of the war offered bounties to entice volunteer soldiers. (Smithsonian)

At the age of twenty-one, Sampson disguised herself as a man named Robert Shurtleff and enlisted in the Continental Army under the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment.

"On the 14th September, 1818, the said Deborah made her declaration, under oath, that she served as a private soldier, under the name of "Robert Shurtleff," in the war of the Revolution, upwards of two years, in manner following:"

“Enlisted in April, 1781, in a company commanded by Captain George Webb, in the Massachusetts regiment commanded by Colonel Shepherd, and afterwards by Colonel Henry Jackson;”

“That she served in Massachusetts and New York until November, 1783, when she was honorably discharged in writing; which discharge she had lost. She was at the capture of Cornwallis, was wounded at Tarrytown”. (Committee of Revolutionary Pensions Report)

To be inducted into the Light Infantry Troops, soldiers had to meet specific requirements. They needed a height of at least 5'5" and had to be physically able to keep a fast and steady marching pace.

They were referred to as “light” infantry because they traveled with fewer supplies and took part in small, risky missions and skirmishes.

She and the other new recruits then marched from Worcester, Massachusetts to West Point, New York. While at West Point, Sampson was chosen to serve as part of the Light Infantry Troops - the most active troops in the Hudson Valley from 1782 to 1783.

Sampson spent most of her time in the army in the Lower Hudson River Valley Region of New York, which was then known as Neutral Ground.



Neutral Ground spanned throughout what is today Westchester County in New York and was termed “neutral” because it sat, unclaimed, between British-held New York City and American-held Northern New York. Neutral Ground was a lawless land filled with both Patriot and Tory raiders who terrorized the local citizenry.

George Washington spent much of his time in the Hudson River Valley just north of Neutral Ground in Newburgh. He journeyed to Newburgh about six months after The Battle of Yorktown and remained there for nearly the entirety of Sampson’s service in the army.

From April 1782 to August 1783, Washington lived at the Hasbrouck residence, not far from the New Windsor Cantonment, where Sampson spent the winter of 1782. While there, she served as a waiter to General John Paterson whenever she was not on missions with the Light Infantry Troops.

While serving in Neutral Ground, Sampson was part of many skirmishes against Loyalist raiders, typically referred to as “cowboys.”

During one of these skirmishes, she was shot in the shoulder. Unable to seek proper medical treatment without revealing her true gender, she allegedly left the bullet in her shoulder and continued her duty as a soldier. (Some suggest she extracted one piece of shrapnel from her leg by herself; another remained in her body for the rest of her life.)

Sampson served undetected until she fell unconscious with a high fever while on a mission in Philadelphia during the summer of 1783.

The attending physician, Dr. Barnabas Binney, discovered Sampson's gender while treating her. He revealed her identity to General Paterson through a letter. Sampson was honorably discharged at West Point on October 25, 1783.

After the war ended, Sampson returned to Massachusetts and married a farmer, Benjamin Gannett, in 1784. They had three children and adopted a fourth. In 1792, she successfully petitioned the Massachusetts State Legislature for back pay for her service in the army and was awarded 34£.

In 1797, she petitioned Congress, claiming disability for the shoulder wound she received during the war. Her petition ultimately failed.

However, starting in March 1802, Sampson began a lecture tour of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New York. She was the first woman in America to do so.

On her journey, she spoke in Boston, Providence, Holden, Worcester, Brookfield, Springfield, Northampton, Albany, Schenectady, Ballston, and New York City.

She made this journey alone and was often ill. During her stay in Albany, on September 11 and 12 of 1802, Sampson recorded that she had "taken Very Sick with the tooth ake [sic] and ague in my face."

The following day she stated that she was "No better. in Extreem [sic] pain. no rest Day nor Night." Despite these recurring maladies, she completed her lecture circuit and returned home in April 1803.

After the lecture tour, Sampson petitioned Congress again. This time, her petition succeeded. On March 11, 1805, she was placed on the pension list for disabled veterans. She continued campaigning Congress for the entirety of the money she was due until she was denied the remainder of her pay on March 31, 1820.

Deborah Sampson Gannett died in Sharon, Massachusetts on April 29, 1827, at the age of sixty-six. She is one of the earliest examples of a woman serving in the United States Military. Her headstone in Sharon



honors this accomplishment, referring to her as "The Female Soldier." (Mount Vernon)

After Sampson died, her husband petitioned Congress to receive a pension as the widower of a Revolutionary veteran. The Committee on Revolutionary Pensions stated in their report,

The committee are aware that there is no act of Congress which provides for any case like the present.

The said Gannett was married after the termination of the war of the Revolution, and therefore does not come within the spirit of the third section of the act of 4th July, 1836, granting pensions to widows in certain cases;

and were there nothing peculiar in this application which distinguishes it from all other applications for pensions, the committee would at once reject the claim

But they believe they are warranted in saying that the whole history of the American Revolution records no case like this, and “ furnishes no other similar example of female heroism, fidelity, and courage.”

The petitioner does not allege that he served in the war of the Revolution, and it does not appear by any evidence in the case that such was the fact.

It is not, however, to be presumed that a female who took up arms in defence of her country, who served as a common soldier for nearly three years, and fought and bled for human liberty, would, immediately after the termination of the war, connect herself for life with a tory or a traitor.

He, indeed, was honored much by being the husband of such a wife; and as he has proved himself worthy of her, as he has sustained her through a long life of sickness and suffering, and as that sickness and suffering were occasioned by the wounds she received and the hardships she endured in the defence of the country,

and as there cannot be a parallel case in all time to come, the committee do not hesitate to grant relief. They report a bill granting to the petitioner a pension of \$80 per year from the 4th day of March, 1831, for and during his natural life.

Information here is primarily from US Government Printing Office; Mount Vernon; Daily Mail; Committee on Revolutionary Pensions Report; Battlefields; National Archives; Smithsonian; National Women’s History Museum; Massachusetts Government website

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young