

“Meet the Women of the American Revolution”

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3 July 2015

Website: Women in the World

<https://womenintheworld.com/2015/07/03/meet-the-women-of-the-american-revolution/>

Much has been written on the fathers of the Revolution, but what about the all-important mothers?

In 1840, Charles Francis Adams, a grandson of President John Adams and Abigail Adams, lamented, “The heroism of the females of the Revolution has gone from memory with the generation that witnessed it, and nothing, absolutely nothing remains upon the ear of the young of the present day.” While much ink has been spilled on the men who signed the Declaration of Independence, emerged victorious at Yorktown, and debated the framework of the Constitution, the experiences, influences, and contributions of women during this momentous period have been little noticed by history.

Since they made up approximately half of the population of colonial America, the American Revolution both affected women and was affected by women. The boycott of British goods for instance, would likely have failed without their participation. It was not enough that women made the political choice to participate in the boycott. Efforts against the importation and consumption of British goods would have been futile if women were not prepared to replace those imports with apparel of their own making. The women of the American Revolution were a motley crew of various combinations of class, color, age, and education, and their experiences during the war were as diverse and varied as the women themselves. Without them, the new country may not have survived. As Americans celebrate the country’s independence this weekend, get to know some of the women who were critical to the nation’s birth.

Soldiers and Camp Followers:

Deborah Sampson Gannett

In the spring of 1782, half a year after General Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown, Deborah Sampson — wearing a uniform she had stitched herself — enlisted in the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment of the Continental Army using the name of a distant relative, Robert Shurtleff. She was not the only woman masquerading as a man in the Continental Army, but because she managed to keep her gender a secret for so long, she is widely considered the most successful. Her ruse was discovered when a wound she sustained became infected. After she was granted an honorable discharge, Sampson married, teamed up with Herman Mann to write a memoir rife with exaggerations, and embarked on a popular lecture tour.

That provided Sampson with both a platform to justify her actions and to make her case for a military pension. She described her decision to enlist as a result of being compelled by a patriotic zeal and her natural curiosity. “Wrought upon at length, by an enthusiasm and frenzy that could brook no control — I burst the tyrant bands...and clandestinely, or by stealth, grasped an opportunity, which custom and the world seemed to deny,” she explained. She fought so that “we might be permitted and acknowledged to enjoy what we had so nobly declared we would possess, or lose with our lives – freedom and independence.” After completing her address, Sampson would leave the stage before returning in the Continental Army uniform to perform martial maneuvers. She won her pension in 1805.

Soldiers and Camp Followers:

Molly Pitcher

Women and children traveled with the Continental Army as camp followers for a number of reasons. Some did so out of economic necessity.... They often tended to the wounded and the dead, worked in hospitals, endeavored to boost morale, and fetched water. It is estimated that they made up between five and 10 percent of a camp's population, and since Patriot soldiers remained without pay for long periods, the most women received in return for their labor were army rations.

Historians are divided on whether camp follower Molly Pitcher was an actual person, a figure intended to represent the experiences of numerous women, or the protagonist of an apocryphal tale. It is said that Pitcher was normally tasked with fetching water for exhausted soldiers, but that after her husband collapsed during battle, she stepped into his place and began loading cannons. She continued manning the cannon even after an enemy cannon ball passed through her legs, tearing off the bottom of her petticoat. The story of Molly Pitcher shares much in common with that of Margaret Corbin, who fired the cannons during the Battle of Fort Mifflin following the death of her husband. Unlike Pitcher, Corbin was injured during the battle and lost the use of one arm. In 1926, her remains were moved to West Point where she was buried with full military honors.

Couriers and Spies:

Sybil Ludington

Often described as the ‘female Paul Revere,’ Sybil Ludington of Putnam County, New York, is purported to have also set out on a midnight ride — double the distance of Revere’s — to warn the people that the British were coming. On the rainy evening of April 26, 1777, an exhausted messenger arrived at the Ludington residence to inform Colonel Henry Ludington, Sybil’s father, that British troops had begun to loot and torch a nearby town. It was imperative that the Colonel’s Minutemen be mustered for the fight. According to Martha Lamb, who penned a 19th century chronicle about Putnam County during the Revolution, “Sibyl Ludington, a spirited young girl of 16, mounted her horse in the dead of night and performed this service, and by the next morning the whole regiment was on its rapid march to Danbury.” Though [some have called into question](#) the veracity of this tale, a statue of Sybil Ludington sitting sidesaddle on a horse and brandishing a stick in her right hand can be found in Carmel, New York.

Couriers and Spies:

Emily Geiger

Some women capitalized on prevailing attitudes that pegged them as fragile and non-threatening wives and mothers to act as couriers and spies, often moving freely in and out of British lines and camps under the pretense of selling goods. Thanks to a combination of cunning guile and an exceptional memory, Emily Geiger of South Carolina managed to narrowly avoid capture and to play a crucial role in the defeat of the British forces of Lord Rawdon. A teenager, Geiger volunteered to travel 100 miles by horse with a handwritten message from General Nathaniel Greene to General Thomas Sumter about Tory troop movements. On the second day of her journey, Geiger was stopped by a group of British scouts. While waiting for a British woman to search her, she tore Greene's letter into pieces and ate it. Without evidence of a written dispatch in her possession, Geiger was let go, but because she had committed the contents of the message to memory, she still successfully delivered Greene's orders, which spelled the end of Lord Rawdon's army.

Couriers and Spies:

Anna Strong

Famous for the intelligence gathering operation that uncovered Benedict Arnold's treasonous plot, the Culper Spy Ring is one of the most captivating spy rings of the Revolution. Organized by Major Ben Tallmadge under the guidance of George Washington, it employed a dizzying array of methods including numeric codes, invisible ink, ciphers, and dead drops. A number of women also participated in the ring's espionage. After the British captured her husband, Anna Strong, like many women, was tasked with running a household, rearing her children, and tending to the land on her own. But it is also widely believed that she developed a signaling system for other undercover operatives through the manner in which she arranged her laundry. If a black petticoat appeared on the line, it indicated that there was information to communicate, while the number of white handkerchiefs signified where to find messages. The Strongs were reunited following the Revolution and named their last child George Washington.

The Community Organizer:

Esther de Berdt Reed

Though she may have been London-born, Esther de Berdt Reed cast aside all doubts about her loyalties when she published “Sentiments of an American Woman” in the Pennsylvania Packet newspaper. [The essay](#) called upon those women of America “animated by the purest patriotism” to “render themselves more really useful” to the public good. Shortly after the publication of Reed’s formal request for women to join her patriotic cause, a group of 30 women met with her to form the Ladies Association of Philadelphia, the first female voluntary association in America. Comprising primarily wealthy women, its members called upon the press and mobilized their extensive social networks in order to publicize their undertaking, traveling door-to-door to raise money for the war effort. The Association raised nearly \$300,000 continental dollars, and used the money to sew clothing for the soldiers of the Continental Army, per the request of George Washington.

The Newspaper Publisher:

Mary Katherine Goddard

Appointed Baltimore's postmaster in 1775 by Benjamin Franklin, Mary Katherine Goddard was the first woman to run a national government office. Her brother, William Goddard, established an independent colonial postal system and published a revolutionary newspaper called *The Maryland Journal*. With William traveling frequently during the Revolutionary War, Mary continued to fearlessly publish her brother's newspaper despite its anti-Tory rhetoric and to oversee his printing shops. She developed into a publisher of repute, the Continental Congress turned to her to print a copy of the Declaration of Independence for wide distribution in 1777. [The Goddard Broadside](#), as it is known, is the first copy of the Declaration to have the names of all of the signatories listed. Despite her contributions, Mary was relieved of her duties in 1789 by the new postmaster general, and replaced with a less qualified male. Nearly 230 citizens signed a petition demanding she be reinstated to the role in which she had given "universal Satisfaction to the community," but it was to no avail.

The Defender of House and Home:

Catherine Schuyler

Somewhere in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art is [an 1852 painting](#) by Emanuel Leutze immortalizing Catherine Schuyler deliberately setting fire to her fields of wheat to keep them from the enemy. The wife of an army general, Schuyler was forced to run their many estates alone when her husband set off for war. For the majority of women who stayed at home during the Revolution, running a household and tending to the land proved an enormous challenge for one person, complicated by inflated food prices, outbreaks of dysentery and influenza, and the threat that the British would ransack and vandalize their homes. During the British march toward Saratoga, fleeing civilians warned Catherine against returning to her estate there. She chose not to heed their advice and traveled anyway, salvaging what she could before setting fire to her wheat fields to prevent the British from taking what they wanted of her crop. The British eventually employed a scorched-earth policy of their own and set fire to the Schuyler's estate. The Schuyler's oldest daughter first noted her mother's singular act of courage in the early 19th century, though some historians have cast doubt over whether it happened at all.

The Political Philosopher:

Abigail Adams

The second first lady and mother of the sixth president, Abigail Adams left behind countless letters and other writings, many of which provide a vivid eyewitness account of the Revolution. Her voluminous correspondence with husband John Adams is full of both her own insightful political observations and his quite frequent appeals for her advice and approval. Perhaps the most oft-quoted line from their letters is Abigail's plea that John "Remember the Ladies" when framing the Constitution, a request that he swiftly dismissed. In other letters, she astutely points out the contradiction between the longing of colonists to gain independence and the fact that many of them were "accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs."

Aside from her political contemplations, Abigail's writings provide a first-hand account of the loneliness that many women felt while their husbands, brothers, and sons were absent for long periods. In one letter..., she laments the "painful separation from the companion of my youth and the friend of my heart." Though she advised John frequently during his election campaigns, the transition to First Lady was not a particularly easy one for Abigail. "I have been so used to freedom of sentiment that I know not how to place so many guards about me, as will be indispensable, to look at every word before I utter it, and to impose a silence upon myself, when I long to talk," she wrote.

The Biting Satirist

Mercy Otis Warren

With a brother who coined the phrase “taxation without representation” and a social circle that included the likes of John and Abigail Adams, it is perhaps no surprise that Mercy Otis Warren was at the forefront of revolutionary fervor. While not formally educated, Warren emerged as one of the great scribes of Revolutionary America. Her first publication was *The Adulateur: A Tragedy As It Is Now Acted In Upper Servia*, a satirical play published anonymously in the *Massachusetts Spy* before its enormous popularity saw it published as a pamphlet. Eager to bleed his colony dry for his own enrichment, the play’s protagonist, Rapatio, was modeled after Massachusetts governor Thomas Hutchinson. Rapatio must confront the opposition of Brutus and Cassius, patriots who urge their fellow citizens to fight for their freedom. Enormously outspoken, some of Warren’s other writings chastised women who refused to participate in the boycott of British goods.

Warren grew increasingly disillusioned following the Revolution and fell out with friends like John and Abigail Adams. An anti-Federalist, she was strongly opposed to the ratification of the Constitution. She believed that her old friends were abandoning revolutionary principles by creating a national government with unprecedented authority that would be less responsive to the popular will than state governments would be. Warren’s final piece of writing was the three-volume *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*, the very first history of the American Revolution and the creation of the new government.

The Poet:

Phillis Wheatley

Stolen from her parents in Gambia and sold to a slave-owning family in Boston, it was with the odds stacked against her that Phillis Wheatley became the first black poet in America to publish a book. At the time of the Revolution, 500,000 African Americans inhabited the United States, and all but 25,000 were slaves. While a slave, Wheatley received an education better than that afforded to most girls of any race in America, and eventually gained her freedom in 1773. Her first book of poetry was published that same year in England because no American publisher would print it. In fact, her publishers were so concerned that no one would believe a female slave had penned a book of poetry that they asked nearly twenty distinguished men in Boston to authenticate that she had.

Free blacks could not vote, lacked the assurances of equal justice afforded to even the lowliest white criminal, and lived under curfews. Free black women in the north also lived in constant fear of being kidnapped and sold into slavery in the south. Since the social and legal constraints for free blacks often meant that they had no choice but to remain poor laborers or seamstresses, the fact that a free black woman was able to publish a book of poetry to high acclaim was considered a remarkable accomplishment. After Wheatley wrote a letter and poem in support of George Washington, she received an invitation to visit him in Cambridge. Though she spent years after the publication of her book reciting her poetry for elite crowds in the United States and London, Wheatley died in poverty. In the new nation, black Americans still faced a future of uncertainty and second-class citizenship.