

Women in the Revolution

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When thinking of the heroes of the American Revolution, great men such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Henry Knox, and Thomas Jefferson come to mind. While their contributions are many and significant, the contributions of a less assuming force cannot be overlooked. Women also played important roles during the American Revolution providing services as camp followers, soldiers, and spies.

Perhaps the most common role of women at the time was that of a camp follower. Camp followers were those who traveled with the army providing help with nursing soldiers, doing laundry, cooking meals, mending clothing, tending to children, and cleaning the camp. Even the likes of Martha Washington took up work as a camp follower. An observer of Martha said, "I never in my life knew a woman so busy from early morning until late at night as was Lady Washington, providing comforts for the sick soldiers." Camp followers were paid a small wage and received a half ration of food. The role was fitting for women of the 18th century because these were the roles they would have played during times of war or peace. However, even with the monotony of the work of a camp follower it is sure that women took pride in this work as they were able to support the cause of the Patriots by supporting the Patriots themselves.

Another role some women found themselves in during the American Revolution was that of a soldier. This was not a role women were asked to fill, but a role some forced themselves in to. The heroic efforts of Margaret Corbin and Mary Hayes are combined into the well-known story of "Molly Pitcher" who came to the aid of soldiers bringing them water during battle to keep them from dehydrating. She is also said to have taken over firing the cannon after her husband was wounded and could no longer perform the duty. While these women took on soldiering in the heat of the moment, there were others who planned to be soldiers and went to great lengths to disguise their femininity and enlist in the war. Deborah Sampson did just that and was very successful as a soldier, becoming an aide-de-camp to General John Paterson at West Point. Her true identity was discovered while being treated by a physician after becoming ill and she was honorably discharged. The soldiering efforts of women like these furthered the revolution and began paving the way for women to hold a serious place in war.

Just as the perception and expectations of women during the American Revolution naturally suited them for the common work of a camp follower, they also naturally suited them for the work of a spy. Women were thought to be innocent by nature and simple minded. Because of this, men spoke freely around them about war strategy and plans. Some women took advantage of this by listening intently to conversations while appearing to be simply attending to chores. Later, they would tell what they overheard to their connection in the army. Ann Bates served as a spy for the British, counting Continental troops and supplies, all the while her presence never being suspected because she was a woman. In New York, as part of the Patriot Culper Spy Ring, the code name "355" was used for women or women spies working within the ring. It is certain that there were many women who took part in spying, although their stories may never have been documented because women were not suspected of such behavior, which in turn made them perfect for the role.

While women had many roles during the American Revolution, their most significant service was in the roles of camp follower, soldier, and spy. The American Revolution was a time where women began to realize their power and abilities. Many shared the sentiments of Abigail Adams who wrote, "If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to

foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.” The heroic efforts of women are not as widely celebrated as those of men, but they do exist and women have been a powerful force for good throughout time. Women have always been, and will always be, half the story of history.

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