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Revolutionary Mothers Chapter 4: Women Who Followed the Army

After the battle of Saratoga, General John Burgoyne's emaciated army of 5,000 British soldiers and officers were forced to march to Boston. There, they would board ships heading to London and swore never to return to fight in the American Colonies. A young colonial woman named Hannah Winthrop witnessed a rather unusual site of 2,000 fatigued, war torn women who, in her words appeared to be the "beasts of burden, having a bushel basket on the their back, by which the were bent double" (Berkin, pg. 50), bringing up the rear of the division. She mentioned that the women's bushels were filled with "pots and kettles, various sorts of furniture, children peeping through" (Raphael pg. 157). Many of the women carried infants in their arms. They were barefoot and dressed in rags, most of which were collected from fallen soldiers. These women followed the army throughout the war. Known as camp followers they braved the conditions of battle without fighting as men did (Berkin, pg. 50).

British women were not the only camp followers that had a tough go during the Revolutionary War; most were continentals. In fact, almost every single army division, battalion and sometimes even a company of soldiers would have camp followers that accompanied them. The majority of women were help maids to perform the necessities of life; cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, carry for the wounded, scavenging for supplies, and would sometimes even be soldiers and spies. Many were paid a merger salary to perform demanding tasks for sometimes up to several hundred troops, while others were wives, girlfriends, or other family members trying to watch over their soldier(s). A lot of them were prostitutes following around lonely soldiers away from home. Some were even known to be mistresses of officers, having permission from their husbands to keep up the war effort by making sure officers are well taken care of. The British referred to them as "trulls" or "doxies" (Berkin pg. 51). The quartermasters in charge of supplying troops called them necessary nuisances, but everyone agreed that were an imperative part of the war effort (Blumenthal, pg. 22).

It is unclear how many women actually took part as camp followers; the number must surely be in the ten of thousands. The number would grow during the winter months

when little fighting took place and shrink in the warmer months when armies were on the move. Carol Berkin brings up fact that not all were women of ill repute. Some higher-grade officers would bring along their wives, while some wives would just come to visit from time to time. Martha Washington would often come visit the Commander of the Armies, usually during the off-season when it was cold. One such occasion was during Valley Forge when she visited the tents of ill, frost bitten, starving men; bringing them a tiny bit of rations and a warm hand to hold. Other officer's wives would throw extravagant galas during the warmer months to help give the men a brief break from the war front (Berkin pg. 54).

As with the men of the Continental army, camp followers had to put up with the harsh conditions and little to no income. They faced a number of sicknesses such as, dysentery, mal-nutrition, smallpox, and a whole slue of venereal diseases. Berkin mentions that in one area of New York City known as the "Holly Ground" because it was owned by St. Paul's church, was known as a breeding ground for brothels filled with prostitutes carrying vast array sexually transmitted diseases. The area was deemed off limits to enlisted men, but with so many of them sneaking off to enjoy themselves, and not enough officers to stop them, little could be done to deter them. When the number of men visiting the Holly Ground slowed down, the prostitutes simply went into the military camps and resumed business. In one regiment from Delaware, venereal diseases got so bad that the commander ordered all women (excluding married and mistresses of high ranking officers) to be examined by the camp's surgeon before joining the group. But this was only effective for the women who were paid by the military, for civilians could not be ordered around by the commander (Berkin pg. 61).

Even though the term "camp followers" brings up negative connotations of unruly, uneducated, lower class harlots and other mischievous women; many were upright, hardworking, brave women who kept the Revolutionary War effort going as well as they could. Berkin mentions Sarah Osborn, who "cooked meals for Washington's soldiers during the Yorktown bombardment" and Sally St. Clair, who died fighting in the siege of Charleston. She brings up the fact that a countless number of wounded men owed their lives to tireless nurses that help aided back to health. Berkin commends the nameless women of the Pennsylvania's 6th Regiment who brought water to their soldiers in the heat

of battle and the thousands of other women who aided the war effort on both sides of the conflict (Berkin pg. 64-66).

Works Cited

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