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Daughters of Liberty: The Women Who Fought in the American Revolution

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Kimberly Trenner

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These Daughters of Liberty during the Revolutionary War were wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers. They served as cooks, nurses, laundresses, spies, couriers and even fighters. They followed their men folk to the camps (camp followers) to do what was necessary in support. They served on the home front keeping the family business and farm intact and active. Even the simple act of gathering flannel, making clothes, and assuring that local merchants did not raise prices on general use goods made a difference in how the War progressed. They spoke to their husbands, fathers, and friends—some even wrote for publication—about the struggles against England and how women were affected. Some were so instrumental in the Revolution that they were awarded military pensions. There is no way to tell how many women were passive in the struggle against England, but it is estimated that approximately 20,000 women were active in the fight by being spies, couriers, nurses, fighters, and camp followers.

—Jerome R. Reich, *Colonial America*

Throughout time women have risen to the occasion—whatever the occasion may be—to support the men folk in their lives whether it was father, brother, or husband. Women worked within the home and the business, acted as spies, couriers, and soldiers. Their help was important in moving the fight for liberty forward. It is important to remember that war breeds sacrifice not only for the soldiers, but for everyone.

Young girls were expected to learn domestic duties. They moved from their father's authority to their husband having no greater purpose in society other than to marry, have babies, and be a good wife. Being a good and proper wife included cooking, cleaning, taking care of and butchering small animals, such as chickens. It was their responsibility to make cheese and butter, to smoke meat, milk the cows, sew and mend clothes, make homespun cloth, candles, and soap, raise the children, and take care of the sick.<sup>1</sup> These same skills made women important during the war. They took over running farms and family businesses. These "deputy husbands [were taking] on larger responsibilities . . . in a socially

acceptable way.”<sup>2</sup>

While women may not have had a voice in politics during the American Revolution, they had a voice at home and they expressed their beliefs and fears. Women such as Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, and Mercy Otis Warren were able to use the time with their husbands and their husband’s friends to aid in setting in motion the split from England. Abigail Adams wrote many letters to her husband expressing her concerns for what was happening pre-war and post-war. In fact, in a letter dated 31 March 1776 she asked that her husband “remember the Ladies”



Figure 1. *Mercy Otis Warren*, oil on canvas by John Singleton Copley, c. 1763.

when creating a new government.”<sup>3</sup>

The author Mercy Otis Warren was the sister of John Otis who was active in early Revolutionary War politics. In 1754, Mercy married John Warren, who went on to serve in the Massachusetts state legislature. Along with his political activism, John Warren often entertained many of the key leaders of the rebellion in their home. In 1769, after her brother was beaten “by colonial revenue officers [Mercy] was increasingly drawn to political activism and hosted protest meetings at her home that resulted in the organization of the Committees of Correspondence.”<sup>4</sup>

Each of the thirteen colonies set up Committees of Correspondence as a way for the colonies to cooperate with each other on all things from commerce to politics. Samuel Adams “at a Boston town meeting on November 2, 1772, secured the appointment of a 21-man ‘committee of correspondence’ . . . to state the rights of the Colonists and of this Province in particular, as men, as Christians, and as subjects; and to communicate and publish the same to the several Towns in the Province and to the World.”<sup>5</sup> Within three months some eighty similar groups had formed locally. Mercy used this platform to expand her talents as a writer by penning several plays that appeared in serial form in the Boston newspaper highlighting the tyranny displayed by the likes of the royal governor against the colonists.

Other women called for boycotts of local merchants who were thought to be price gouging due to the war and limited supplies getting through from England. Other store owners, such as William Jackson, refused to sign the non-importation agreements as a rebuttal to England’s Stamp Act of 1765. Milcah Martha Moore copied such boycotts against Jackson into her commonplace (a journal or diary used by young women to record their thoughts and things they read or heard) book. One entry was a poem encouraging the Daughters of Liberty to

[S]tand firmly resolved  
and bid Grenville to see  
That rather than Freedom,  
we’ll part with our Tea  
And as we love the  
Draught when adry,  
As American Patriots,  
—our Taste we deny.<sup>6</sup>

Realizing the importance of keeping the women involved in the rebellion, the Boston Post-Boy Advertiser ran an article on 16 November 1767 telling the women why their cooperation in boycotts would help to preserve not only their freedom but also their safety.<sup>7</sup> The article encouraged all women to wear their

country linen and to disparage their brocades. The final line of the article read, “Tho’ the times remain darkesh, your men may be sparkish and love you much stronger than ever.”<sup>8</sup>

In 1774, led by Penelope Barker, fifty one women of North Carolina circulated and signed a petition representing the first time that women in a group made a conscientious step into politics. Known as the Edenton Tea Party, the petition read “We, the aforesaid Ladys will not promote ye wear of any manufacturer from England until such time that all acts which tend to enslave our Native country shall be repealed.”<sup>9</sup> After signing the petition, the group sent it to a London newspaper with the hopes that it would be printed and England would take note.



Figure 2. Penelope Barker.  
Artist unknown, circa 1776.

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These boycotts increased the need for home-grown goods—in essence, the need for more spinning, weaving, and sewing. Women gathered in small groups and sewed shirts for soldiers. In Boston, women gathered on the Commons with their spinning wheels and spent the day spinning as a protest towards importation.<sup>10</sup> The women of Boston in 1769 “produced 40,000 skeins of yarn, [while] the women in Middletown, Massachusetts, wove 20,522 yard[s] of cloth.”<sup>11</sup> Some women chose to help the rebellion by corresponding with each other and family members. By writing to each other, they were able to pass information along as to what the enemy was doing in their particular area.

When open warfare broke out in 1775, many women chose to follow their men to war—sometimes they even took their children along. Known as camp followers, these women played an important role in the war effort. Due to their importance as part of the camp, women were treated to half rations (quarter rations were given to the children) and “earned pay as cooks, nurses and laundresses . . . and were subject to military discipline. One woman, for instance, was jailed for using abusive language to an officer.”<sup>12</sup>



Figure 3. Woodcut of Patriot woman, Marblehead, MA, 1779.

Some camp followers worked taking water out to the battlefields for thirsty soldiers and to cool cannon barrels. Known as Molly Pitchers, the name did not represent a single woman as sometimes thought; the name was more a job title. Several Molly Pitchers have stood out in history. Mary Ludwig Hays McCauley followed her husband into battle and when he “collapsed by his cannon at the Battle of Monmouth in 1778, Molly loaded and fired the cannon throughout the battle and is often depicted holding the large rammer.”<sup>13</sup> At the Battle of Monmouth, McCauley marked the second woman to man a gun during an American battle and she received a warrant as a non-commissioned officer.<sup>14</sup>

Deborah Sampson dressed as a man and enlisted in the Army on 20 May 1781 joining the 4th Massachusetts Regiment under the name Robert Shurtleff.<sup>15</sup> Deborah was wounded in the battle at Tarrytown, New York in both the head and thigh. While she allowed the doctor to treat her wounded head, she did not admit to

the leg wound fearing the doctor would discover her secret. Deborah tried to dig the bullet out of her leg herself, and later developed a fever. When the doctor began treating her fever, he discovered her secret. The doctor kept the secret until after Deborah returned to duty at which time he told a General at Fort Knox. On 23 October 1783, Deborah received an honorable discharge with no one the wiser to her gender.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 4. Deborah Sampson, engraving by George Graham. Used as the frontpiece of *The Female Review: Life of Deborah Sampson, the Female Soldier in the War of Revolution*, by Herman Mann (1771-1833).

Anne Trotter Bailey was another woman who disguised herself as a man to fight on the American side. Anne's husband, Richard, died in a battle on 19 October 1774 between Native Americans and the Virginia militia.<sup>17</sup> Another girl, sixteen year old Sybil Ludington, rode forty miles through the countryside in the middle of a rain storm at night to call the militia under her father's command to arms.<sup>18</sup> They knew the British were on the move and feared they would burn Danbury, Connecticut. Thanks to Sybil's ride, nearly four hundred troops rallied, met the British, and saved the town by pushing the British back to sea.

General George Washington's Continental Army suffered a horrible winter at Valley Forge in 1777-1778. The Oneida Indians brought a gift of corn, which was unknown to the soldiers. Polly Cooper, a member of the Oneidas, was left behind to teach the soldier's "how to prepare the nutritional and medicinal food."<sup>19</sup>

Patriot Laodicea "Dicey" Langston Springfield spent the war spying on the enemy. Dicey became a "fly on the wall" in her town in Laurens County, South Carolina, picking up bits and pieces of information. She crossed the Enoree River and reported her tidbits to the rebels. Eventually, the Loyalists became suspicious of her actions and threatened her father. For a while, Dicey stopped her activities. Hearing that Loyalist partisan commander "Bloody Bill" Cunningham was on his way to attack a nearby settlement, Dicey set out in the middle of the night, crossing streams and marshes as well as the storm-swollen Tyger River. When Dicey arrived to warn her brother, "he and his friends rushed to warn everyone, and the next day, when the 'Scout' arrived, they found the area deserted, no one was there for them to 'wreak their vengeance'".<sup>20</sup>

Emily Geiger volunteered to carry a message for General Nathanael Greene across enemy lines. The General wrote the message down, but because of its importance, told Emily what it contained. Tories captured Emily but she refused to give up any message. Since she was a woman, they called a matron to search her body. While waiting for the matron, Emily spent her time eating the message. When nothing could be found on her person, Emily was released and went on to carry out her task by repeating the message given to her by General Greene.<sup>21</sup>

Kate Barry acted as courier and scout. In fact, Kate was such a good scout the South Carolina troops were "seldom surprised by the British."<sup>22</sup> At one time (according to legend) Kate got word that the British were headed into the area so she tied her toddler to the bedpost and rode out to tell her husband and his troops that the British were on the way.

These American women were couriers, spies, Molly Pitchers, nurses, cooks, and laundresses. They were the daughters, wives and mothers. They were

the Daughters of Liberty who fought in the field or on the home front to support their men folk. More importantly, they began to feel a part of something greater than themselves. They served where needed and they took a stand against the British. Traditionally thought of as the weaker sex, through their actions, they soon showed their toughness and value.

## Notes

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2. Alexandra Wurglis, "Deputy Husbands and Republican Mothers; Traditional Women's Roles Become Wedge for Change," *Levermore Global Studies*, Adelphi University, accessed October 13, 2016, [www.adelphi.edu/wp-content/blogs.dir/451/files/2016/08/LGS-Hournal-Spring16-Traditional-Womens-Roles.pdf/t:1471880558-483485](http://www.adelphi.edu/wp-content/blogs.dir/451/files/2016/08/LGS-Hournal-Spring16-Traditional-Womens-Roles.pdf/t:1471880558-483485).

3. Massachusetts Historical Society, "Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March - 5 April 1776" *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, accessed October 14 2016.

4. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Mercy Otis Warren", accessed June 16, 2014, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mercy-Otis-Warren>.

5. *Ibid.*; "Committees of Correspondence", accessed August 1, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Committees-of-Correspondence>.

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7. Massachusetts Historical Society, "Address to the Ladies," *The Coming of the American Revolution 1764-1776*, accessed August 1, 2016. <https://books.google.com/books?id=TFPx-pT-UGoC&printsec=frontcover&dq=%22milcah+martha+moore%22&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewjJqaKc7cbPAhUq6oMKHYVFAzgQ6AEIHjAA#v=onepage&q=%22milcah%20martha%20moore%22&f=true>

8. *Ibid.*

9. National Women's History Museum, "Penelope Barker (1728-1796), accessed June 10, 2014, <https://www.nwhm.org/education-resources/biography/biographies/penelope-barker/>.

10. Linda Grant DePauw, *Founding Mothers: Women in the American Revolutionary Era* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 153.

11. Diane Siniard, North Carolina's Lost Souls Revolutionary War Project. "Women in the Revolutionary War Period," accessed August 23, 2016, <http://ncrevwar.lostsoulsgenealogy.com/wemenar.htm>.

12. Lesley Nelson-Burns, Delaware Center for teacher Education, "Women in the Revolutionary War," accessed September 10, 2016, <http://dcte.udel.edu/hlp2/lessons/revolution/9-revolution-unit.pdf>.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Siniard, "Women in the Revolutionary War Period."

18. National Women's History Museum, "Sybil Ludington (1761-1839)," accessed August 23, 2016, <https://www.nwhm.org/education-resources/biography/biographies/sibyl-ludington/>.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. South Carolina Daughters of the American Revolution, "Who Was Emily Geiger?" accessed September 28, 2016, <https://sites.google.com/site/scdaremilygeiger/?pli=1>.

22. Mary S. Irwin Wood, 18th Century History, "Historical Sketch of Margaret Katherine Barry, Known as 'Kate Barry', Heroine of the Cowpens," accessed August 23, 2016, <http://www.history1700s.com/index.php/articles/8-biography/1294-historical-sketch-of-margaret-katherine-barry-known-as-kate-barry-heroine-of-the-cowpens.html>.

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