



Carlyle House

DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

Heroines, Not Harlots: Female Soldiers in the 18th-Century

by Heather Dunn

Female soldiers in the eighteenth century gained glorious recognition only if they first earned honorable identities as men. Hundreds of women cut their hair, donned men's clothing, and secretly joined the army. Each woman had her own reason for joining; each had different levels of success. The two most successful accounts, and the most celebrated, are those of Deborah Sampson and Hannah Snell. Both these women proved themselves able to fight, serve, and survive as male soldiers in an army and were able to virtuously re-enter the women's sphere.

Women soldiers of the eighteenth century disregarded their expected role in society. Male and female gender roles in the eighteenth century were strictly defined and almost entirely separate. Cloistered at home, women did not go to the store, go to a tavern, or travel on a road without a male escort. Any woman vulnerable and alone in a male dominated situation, such as on country road or in a bawdy tavern, risked her reputation and her personal safety. Even at elite dinner parties men and women often dined separately and socialized after dinner in separate rooms.

Not having an appropriate place in 18th century society, Deborah Sampson became an exception to these rules. She had many duties, both male and female, growing up as the only servant on a small New England farm. By April of 1782, Sampson was twenty-two and unmarried. She had been supporting herself economically for four years and was financially strained. Although the American Revolution was quickly coming to a close most volunteer soldiers received a bounty upon enlistment. This bounty was what first attracted Sampson to a soldier's life. Sampson's first attempt to join the army failed and she was run out of town disgraced. She traveled throughout Massachusetts



Virginia Gazette, Jan 1751

until she finally signed her name as Robert Shurtliff on May 23, 1782 in Worcester. She received £60 and was marched to West Point to join the Massachusetts Fourth Regiment. Disguising herself as a soldier in the army was not a unique idea.

Eighteenth century newspapers reported dozens of women who attempted to disguise themselves as soldiers. The majority of these women were discovered quickly, maintaining their charade for only a couple of weeks at most. Many joined the military to search for lost loved ones. A young girl in Pennsylvania was only able to hide her disguise for a short time. After running away from home she enlisted into the Continental Army at Elizabethtown in 1778. Once suspected, she was forced to strip and then publicly removed from camp as the troops played the "Whores March." The "Whore's March", originally called the "Rogue's March," was a well-known tune played for only two reasons in military camp life. It was played for a soldier receiving a dishonorable discharge and to drive all the prostitutes out of

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21st Century Depiction of Molly Pitcher



camp. This song was used as a form of public humiliation and a deterrent to other members of camp life. Having only served in the army a short time, this young lady did not earn the respect of any of her fellow soldiers. She did not perform any acts of valor and she joined because she was unable to marry the man she desired. To the other soldiers in her company she appeared a silly and stupid female that thought she would be able to fool everyone and survive in the manliest of occupations.

Ann Bailey and Anne Smith both enlisted in the Continental

Army in 1777. They were quickly discovered and did not fight in a single battle. Their commanding officer, Colonel John Paterson, saw to it that they were jailed, fined, and prosecuted. Six years later, General John Paterson, upon learning Deborah Sampson's secret, allowed her to stay until he arranged for her to have an honorable discharge. Paterson was impressed by Sampson, who had faithfully served under his command for over a year and thought she deserved more than punitive action.

Deborah Sampson's inspiration most likely came from Hannah Snell. Hannah Snell was able to successfully serve in the British navy for over four years. Her adventures were widely publicized in both England and the colonies throughout Sampson's lifetime. Immediately after her discharge in 1750 Snell revealed her sex to her comrades. Robert Walker quickly grabbed the chance to write a biography. Gentleman's magazines and newspapers published articles throughout the British Empire. *The Virginia Gazette* published an excerpt of Walker's biography of Snell in January 1751 that covered the entire front page. Snell's glorious adventures were also printed in Isaiah Thomas's the *New England Almanack* in 1774. Snell's book, published as a pamphlet, was available and reprinted throughout the colonies in newspapers and almanacs during the remainder of the eighteenth century.

These eighteenth century popular accounts of

her service in the military not only relate Snell's attitude, but the attitude of the author and the time period. The majority of reports in print concerning Hannah Snell are a segment of Robert Walker's original piece written in 1750. Walker's book described in great detail Snell's many adventures, hardships, and cunning ways she avoided detection. A tale that proved a woman could survive in such a male dominated situation and could have served as an inspirational story. Very shortly after her enlistment, a senior officer approached Snell to lie to a young lady, so that the officer may take advantage of her. Snell chose instead to warn the young lady and was sentenced to five hundred lashings by the officer. Snell not only survived the lashes undetected but won the affections of the lady who later helped her desert the army and join the navy.

Hannah Snell



After each such act of bravery the author stopped the narration of Snell's adventures and reviewed her actions and reminded the readers how courageous and virtuous Snell was. Walker was still flabbergasted that Snell was able to endure all she did as a woman. After

describing a hurricane, food shortages, and a siege that she endured, he concluded, "I say such Reflections and gloomy Prospects, prove the Cause of many such Hardships and Difficulties even in the most robust of the Masculine Gender, how much more in one of the tender Sex who are afraid of Shaddows, and shudder at the Pressage of a Dream." Robert Walker reported to his audience that Hannah Snell was not only braver than the average women, but saying that she was braver than the "most robust" man who would have had difficulty surviving as well as she did.

Walker made these previous statements describing Snell's startling bravery before he even recounted the most courageous portion of her epic tale, the battle in which she was wounded. "During this Space of Time, she behaved with the greatest Bravery and Intrepidity, such as was consistent with the Character of an English Soldier, and though so deep in Water, fired 37 Rounds of Shot, and



received a Shot in the Groin, six Shots in one Leg, and five in the other.” Suffering from twelve wounds and in deep agony, Snell was determined not to be discovered. She was brought to a field hospital but ignored for two days. In that time she extracted the bullet from her groin with her own fingers and bandaged herself. She allowed the doctors to care for the other wounds on her legs, but concealed that she was wounded elsewhere. Her tolerance for pain and commitment to her secret astounded Walker. He asked, “Who would not in the midst of so much Agony and Pain as she felt here, broke through the strongest and most virtuous Resolutions in order to obtain immediate Relief?” By saying “who” and not asking a specific gender in this rhetorical question, Walker was comparing Snell to both men and women. Walker placed Snell in her own category, saying she was braver and more resilient than the average person, male or female. This distinction, that she had gone through hardship and completed tasks that were inconceivable for not only a woman but a man as well, placed her in a heroine category that allowed her to be admired for the deeds she completed. Robert Walker stated, “that such an Instance of Heroism was not to be found in the British Annals.”

Snell’s success, and the praise she received could push a woman, alone in the world, in deep economic strife, and a patriotic sense of adventure to follow in her footsteps. Deborah Sampson never confirmed this assumption but if she did look to Hannah Snell as a role model, she followed her to the letter. Sampson was wounded during a skirmish outside New York in 1782. Her biography reported she received a gash in the head and bullet in her upper thigh. Like Snell, Sampson lied to the doctor and removed the bullet in her leg herself. This however is proven fabrication. This story is so indistinguishable to Snell’s, Sampson likely borrowed it from the similar heroine. According to the Report of the Committee of Congress, January 31, 1837 the musket ball was never removed and described as in a joint, not her thigh. Whether the ball was removed or not, Sampson returned to the front lines. Her biography then states, “Before the wound in my thigh was half healed, I rejoined the army on the lines. But had the hardiest soldier been in the condition I was when I left the hospital, he

would have been excused from military duty.” She too could have gone home, but she chose to return to the fight. She was not a member of the delicate sex; she was a soldier, just as capable if not more than any other man.

Mann also depicted Sampson as having more sense and patience than her male comrades. She led a portion of her company to a house of Tories. The men wished to charge the house immediately but Sampson convinced them to wait until the Tories were drunk and asleep. Her company was able to capture fifteen Tories and nine horses without a single casualty. Her Captain commended her strategy and her success and offered her a bottle of fine liquor. Now having been wounded in battle and the leader of a successful raiding squad, Sampson had captured the positive attention of both her superiors and her comrades. She showed bravery under fire, loyalty to the army, and military prowess in a leadership position. These qualities enabled her to hold her reputation and respect after her sex was discovered. Because her commanding officer and fellow soldiers held a respect for Robert Shurtliff, her male identity, they were more likely able to transfer that respect to her feminine self. The details of the moment of her discovery are not clear. However, her commanding officers commended her. Colonel Jackson called her a “faithful and good soldier” and General Paterson allowed her to stay on as his servant until her honorable discharge was arranged.



Cover Art for Life of Deborah Sampson by Herman Mann.



Mary Ludwig Hays "Molly Pitcher"

The first newspaper article concerning Deborah Sampson appeared October 1783 and proclaimed to the readers Sampson’s achievements while assuring her enduring virtue. The article clearly stated that while serving in the army Sampson “displayed herself with activity, alertness, chasity and valour...was never found in liquor, and always kept company with the most upright and temperate soldiers.”



Deborah Sampson and Hannah Snell were placed on a heroine pedestal with their first publication and such publicity continued throughout their lives and into the present day. The Massachusetts legislature recognized Sampson's service and "extraordinary female heroism" and awarded her back pay. She was also awarded a pension from congress in 1808. Snell and Sampson continued to spread their own fame with lecture tours and onstage appearances. This too was unprecedented as women did not speak publicly at this time.

Famous women of the eighteenth century include Martha Washington and Abigail Adams. These women, from the upper-crust of American society, entered the public realms safely on the coattails of their husbands. They are well known throughout history first for their husbands and second for their deeds. But they were by no means heroines. A hero must be famous for a larger than life deed, a courageous adventure, have noble qualities, and stand alone, a legend in the history books. Women could not become heroines inside the constraints of the feminine sphere. There was not a task a woman could accomplish, while completely following the ideal qualities of femininity, which allowed her to be a heroine. Therefore, women that became heroines in the eighteenth century did so by performing male endeavors. For example, the well-known "Molly Pitcher," or Mary Ludwig Hays, did not disguise herself as a soldier, but only became a heroine after her husband fell and she took over his position at the cannon. Hays, however, had been lugging water throughout the entire Battle of Monmouth in the American

Revolution. Many women risked their lives and brought food and water to the men and the wounded amidst the shooting during many battles. Hays is remembered, not for completing a domestic duty in mortal danger, but for completing a military duty. Snell and Sampson completely cast off all facets of their femininity to achieve their level of heroism. Today, a statue sits on the town green in

Plympton, Massachusetts. This statue of Deborah Sampson depicts a woman in female dress and holding a rifle. Like so many wartime heroes before her, Sampson's image has been cast in stone and displayed for generations to come.

Statue of Deborah Sampson, Plympton, MA



March Docent Recruitment Drive and Training!



Carlyle House wants **YOU** to help recruit docents. Please let a friend, relative, loved one or even a stranger you met in yoga class know about our upcoming training. Some of our most dedicated docents were recruited by a friend or casual acquaintance and its your turn to return the favor!

Forward these dates to a potential docent– we are aiming high for this training. If everyone asked someone– it would make a big difference.

**Tuesday, March 2nd, 10am
Tour and Coffee Hour with Staff and Docents**

**Tuesday, March 9th, 10am
"The Life of John Carlyle" Lecture
with Director Jim Bartlinski**

**Tuesday, March 16th, 10am
Decorative Arts and Restoration tour
with Curator Sarah Coster**

**Tuesday, March 23rd, 10am
Tour Techniques Workshop with
Curator of Education Heather Dunn**

**Contact Heather Dunn at
hdunn@nvrpa.org for more details
or to sign up.**