

The Roles of Women in the Revolutionary War

Women took on many roles in the Revolutionary War. Some of these roles were traditional while others were unconventional and even scandalous for the time.

From supportive jobs like nurses, cooks and maids to more direct roles such as secret soldiers and spies, these [Daughters of Liberty](#) did more than their share to help win America's independence.

Here's an overview of these roles as well as a look at the famous women of the Revolutionary War who performed them:

Nurses

Although nurses were not used much during the early days of the war, they became more prevalent in 1777. According to the book, *The Revolutionary War*, many nurses were originally camp followers: wives, daughters and mothers of male soldiers who followed the army looking for food and protection because they were no longer able to support themselves after the men left for war:



"A Society of Patriotic Ladies" a British cartoon mocking the Edenton Ladies Tea Party, a political protest against the British government organized by a group of North Carolina women in 1774

"In early 1777, Washington asked his commanding officers to 'assist Regimental Surgeons in procuring as many Women of the Army [camp followers] as can be prevailed on to serve as Nurses to them who will be paid the usual price.' Later after the reorganization of the Continental army medical staff, one hospital matron and ten nurses were allocated for every hundred sick and wounded men. Nurses were to receive 0.24 cents a day plus one full food ration. The matrons, being in a more supervisory position, got more than twice that rate at 0.50 cents a day plus the full ration."

While surgeons and surgeon mates performed most of the skilled medical duties, female nurses did mostly custodial work, feeding and bathing patients, emptying chamber pots, cleaning hospital wards and occasionally cooking.

According to the book *It's Our Military Too! Women and the U.S. Military*, female nurses often came up with new inventions to help treat and care for patients:

“Nurses introduced innovations, however, to keep patients comfortable and help them recover, including stone hot-water bottles, combination lamps and food-warmers, varying sizes of china feeding cups, and ‘go-chairs’ (wheelchairs) and fan chairs (wheelchairs with fans.) A popular part of the patient’s diet provided by nurses was warm ‘pap’ (milk in which oatmeal had been cooked and strained and to which beaten egg yolks, butter, and orange flavor were added) and beef tea, an extract of beef juices.”

Despite the opportunity for food and pay, many women were reluctant to take nursing jobs since the mortality rate in hospitals for the sick as well as for the caregivers was exceptionally high. Some women were not easily scared though and became nurses anyway, despite the risk.

One such nurse was Mary Waters, a Dublin native who immigrated to Philadelphia in 1766 and became an army nurse after the war broke out. A biography was even written about Waters in 1791, but it was never published. Another famous nurse was Mary Pricely who served as a nurse on colonial warships, such as the ship the *Defense* in 1777.

According to the book *It's Our Military Too!*, a survey was conducted at the end of the war and found that seven matrons and 30 nurses were serving the military in seven hospitals and were caring for over 4,000 men. After the war was over, patient care reverted back to regimental surgeons and surgeon’s mates with occasional assistance from military wives and laundresses.

Seamstresses, Cooks and Maids

Some of the most common roles for women in the Revolutionary War were cooks, maids, laundresses, water bearers and seamstresses for the army. This was the first time women held these jobs in the military since these positions were usually reserved for male soldiers.

Much like the nursing positions, the American army often recruited the many female

camp followers to fill these jobs. Since most of these women were poor wives, mothers and daughters who were accustomed to doing housework, they were well suited for the positions.

One such camp follower was Margaret Corbin of Philadelphia. Corbin followed her husband, John, to the army when he enlisted in the First Company of the Pennsylvania Artillery as a matross, someone who loads and fires cannons.

During the Battle of Fort Washington in November of 1776, Margaret Corbin was with her husband on the battlefield when he was suddenly killed. Since his cannon was then unmanned, Margaret Corbin took his place and continued firing until she was wounded herself.

The colonists lost that battle and Corbin was captured but was later released. Corbin became the first woman to earn a pension for her service in the Revolutionary War. The legend of Molly Pitcher is believed to have been based on Corbin.

Soldiers



Woodcut of an armed female combatant from “A New Touch on the Times” circa 1779

Although women were not allowed to join the military at the time, many women still served as secret soldiers during the Revolutionary War.

These female soldiers usually disguised themselves as men by cutting their hair, binding their breasts with bandages and adopting masculine names.

Their motivations for signing up vary but, since most of these women were young, unmarried and poor, many of them joined in order to earn money for their families as well as for the rare opportunity to fight for America’s independence.

It’s not surprising that since the [American Revolution began in Massachusetts](#), many of

these women soldiers were from Massachusetts. Some of these women soldiers include [Deborah Sampson](#) from Plympton, Mass, who fought in New York under the alias Robert Shurtliff in 1781 and served for over a year before she was discovered.

Another female soldier was Ann (or Nancy) Bailey of Boston who enlisted in 1777 under the alias Sam Gay and was promoted to Corporal before her true identity was discovered just a few weeks later, resulting in her arrest and imprisonment.

After her release, Bailey signed up again and served as a soldier for a few weeks before she was discovered and jailed again, according to the book *The Revolutionary War*.

Spies

Many women also served as spies during the American Revolution, although it is not known how many.

According to the National Women's History Museum website, most of these female spies worked as cooks and maids for the British and American military camps where they eavesdropped on conversations about troop movements, military plans, supply shortages and deliveries.

Since the war was fought on farms, city streets and the front yards of many American's homes, these spies easily carried the messages and supplies they gathered to neighboring houses and farms without detection.

Not much is known about the women spies in Massachusetts since the American army didn't have a central spy system during the [Siege of Boston](#) like it did when the war later moved on to New York.

There, the army set up the Culper Spy Ring and even devised the code name "355" specifically for women or women spies working within the ring.

One famous female revolutionary spy was Hannah Blair, a Quaker from North Carolina. Blair had a farm where she would hide and protect patriots, supplied food and medical help to soldiers hiding in the woods from loyalist raiders, mended uniforms and carried

secret messages.

When loyalists in the area discovered what she was doing, they burned her farm down. Fortunately, Congress compensated her for her loss after the war by issuing her a pension for her service.

These roles are just some of the many ways women participated in the Revolutionary War. Either as nurses, maids, spies or soldiers, these women stepped out of the safety and security of their traditional roles in society and risked their lives to serve their country.

While some of them were recognized and rewarded for their sacrifices with military pensions and pay, many were not. A few of them, such as Deborah Sampson, even published memoirs about their activities during the war, yet most of these women's stories remain untold.

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