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Deborah Sampson: The Grit of a Soldier

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Women During the American Revolutionary War

At the time of the American Revolutionary War, women were not allowed to join the military. However, some women disguised themselves as men so they could fight. One woman, Deborah Sampson, dressed as a man and fought in the Continental Army. She made history by becoming the only woman to receive a full military pension—a government-funded, monthly benefit—for her service as a soldier during the Revolutionary War.



Life as an Indentured Servant

In 1760, Deborah Sampson was born in Massachusetts. Her parents were poor, and they had many children. In those days, many people did not think it was important for girls to learn to read. Sampson was fortunate because her cousin taught her how to read. Sampson worked as an indentured servant for the Thomas family until she turned 18. She worked hard, carrying heavy loads of wood for the fire, bringing in water from the well, washing the clothes, taking care of the children, cleaning, and cooking. After her indenture was completed, Sampson worked as a weaver and a teacher.

The Beginning of the Revolutionary War

In Sampson's time, America was nothing like it is today. The land that became the United States was, in the interior regions, mainly populated by Native American tribes. Along the eastern seaboard, the 13 colonies, which belonged to England, attracted new populations from across the ocean. The King of England made the colonists in America pay high taxes. Many colonists thought the taxes were unfair. They wanted to be free from British rule and make their own laws.

Sampson knew all about these issues. In 1773, when she was 13, some colonists protested the high tax on tea by dumping tea into Boston Harbor. In 1774, when Sampson was 14, the King of England punished the people of Boston. He said no ships could sail in or out of Boston Harbor until the tea was paid for. Many people worried that the people of Boston would starve, so they planted extra corn to send to the hungry people of Boston. Sampson did the same, planting extra corn on the Thomas farm. In 1775, when Sampson was 15, the trouble was getting worse and the country was preparing for war. Soldiers began training in her village. People began to collect guns and barrels of powder.

In 1775 British soldiers tried to seize the guns and powder the colonists had hidden in the town of Concord, near Boston. The battle, the Battle of Lexington and Concord, was the first battle of the Revolutionary War. The following year, on July 4, 1776, when Sampson was 16, the first Congress of America voted for the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration said that all men are created equal and that they have the right to form their own government and to be a free country—free from England's rule. The Revolutionary War was a long one. In 1778, when Sampson was 18, France sent ships and soldiers to help the Americans.

Sampson Joins the Continental Army

In Sampson's time, girls were expected to get married as soon as they could and raise a big family. Sampson loved children, but she wanted to travel and have adventures. In 1782, when she was 21, she decided to join the Continental Army. She dressed as a man and enlisted as "Robert Shurtleff" in the 4th Massachusetts Regiment. She and the other new recruits were given uniforms, guns, and heavy knapsacks to carry on their backs. They marched from Worcester, Massachusetts, to West Point, New York. While at West Point, Sampson was chosen to serve as part of the light infantry troops, the most active troops in the Hudson Valley from 1782 to 1783.

Sampson quickly realized that war was terrible. She had to go on long marches. She saw men being shot and dying. She had to go without food, sometimes for days. She got blisters and sores on her hands and feet. But she never complained. Sampson was given the dangerous task of scouting neutral territory to assess British buildup of men and military equipment in Manhattan, which General George Washington was thinking about attacking.

Sampson's Injury

One day, Sampson and some soldiers went on a mission to get food that had been stolen by the Tories, who were loyal to the British. Sampson was shot in her thigh and was cut by a sword on her forehead. She showed true grit by removing a pistol ball from her own thigh using a penknife and a sewing needle. Another bullet was lodged too deep, and it remained in her body for the rest of her life. Her leg never fully healed.

Sampson's Identity Revealed

Her identity was revealed during the summer of 1783 when she contracted a fever while on duty in Philadelphia. The doctor realized that "Robert Shurtleff" was, in fact, a woman. The doctor kept Sampson's secret and cared for her. Sampson received an honorable discharge and went back to Massachusetts.

Sampson Tells Her Story

She later married and had three children. In 1797, she joined forces with the newspaper publisher Herman Mann, who ghostwrote an account of Sampson's wartime years: *The Female Review: or, Memoirs of an American Young Lady*. In 1802, Sampson became one of the first women to lecture professionally in the United States and talked about her experiences as a soldier. She traveled to many cities, including Boston, Providence, Albany, and New York City. She made this journey alone and was often ill. But she kept going, completed her lecture circuit, and returned home in 1803.

Sampson's Legacy of Grit

Sampson became the only woman to earn a full military pension for her service in the Revolutionary War—though she had to fight hard to get it. Her cause was taken up by Paul Revere. In her memory, a statue stands outside the public library in Sharon, Massachusetts, honoring her Revolutionary War service and sacrifices.

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