





Uncommon Fortitude

— THE LEGENDARY ADVENTURES OF —

Deborah Sampson Gannett

Deborah Sampson Gannett may not have been the only woman to see military service during the Revolutionary War or receive a disability pension from Congress. But in the course of waging a persistent and successful public campaign for the pay and pension benefits she believed were her due, she became America's first professional traveling woman lecturer.

The fifth of seven children, Deborah Sampson was born in Plympton, Mass., in 1760. Her parents were *Mayflower* descendants: Her mother, Deborah Bradford, was a great-granddaughter of William Bradford, the first governor of the Plymouth Colony, and her father, Jonathan Samson Jr., was descended from Henry Samson who came over on the *Mayflower*. (She later changed the spelling of her last name to "Sampson.") Her father abandoned the family in the mid-1760s, and her indigent mother was forced to "disband her family and to scatter her children abroad," according to Historian Alfred F. Young, author of *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2004). Deborah worked as a servant until she turned 18 and became "a masterless woman." For the next three years, she supported herself as a spinner and weaver and for "two seasons" taught school. Meanwhile, the Revolutionary War raged, and hostilities continued even after the victory at Yorktown in 1781.

Dressing in men's clothing was against the law for women when Sampson joined the ranks of the Continental Army in 1782. (In Massachusetts at that time, cross-dressing was both illegal and immoral from a religious standpoint.) There was no physical examination for getting into the Army, and no one requested proof of age or residency, but Gannett's first attempt to enlist, using the name Timothy Thayer, was unsuccessful. When her deception was detected, she clashed with church authorities. Fearing civil prosecution for her offense, she left town dressed as a man.

by NADINE GOFF illustration by ZELA LOBB

On May 20, 1782, Sampson enlisted in Bellingham, Mass., using the name Robert Shurtliff. She passed muster at Worcester on May 23, receiving a bounty of 60 pounds “to serve in the Continental Army for a term of three years.” She was stationed at West Point and served with the Light Infantry Company of the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment.

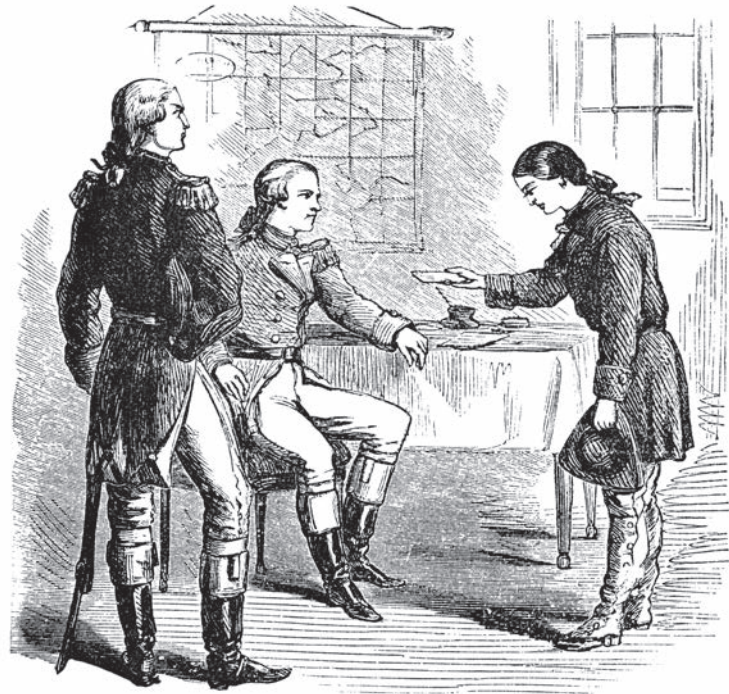
She served for 17 months, during which she was involved in several skirmishes and wounded twice. Only after she was hospitalized in Philadelphia for “a violent illness” was her masquerade discovered.

How was she able to hide her true identity for so long? Young argues “the attributes needed to maintain her deception—to be alert, quick and street smart—were the very ones that made her an ideal choice for the light infantry.” He asserts that, “She hid herself as a woman ... by standing out as a man.”

In a brief remembrance of her, Calvin Munn, a drill sergeant with the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, wrote that between the time she was discovered to be a woman and the date of her discharge, “she was protected by the officers whom she served under,” a response Young attributes to the fact that “she was found out after she had proven herself in military action.”

LOST AND REDISCOVERED

Although she left few written records—a short diary, two one-page letters and some short petitions—Gannett’s story did not disappear from history, even after she returned to Massachusetts, married Benjamin Gannett Jr., and began raising a family. Her accomplishments did, however, fade from public consciousness. Young notes that, for more than two centuries, her life story “illustrates what Gloria Steinem calls the general fate of women’s history: ‘to be lost and discovered, lost again and rediscovered, relost and rerecovered.’”



Sampson presents a letter of commendation written by her commanding officer on her behalf to Gen. George Washington. She was later granted an honorable discharge from the Continental Army.

of an American Young Lady, made its subject a celebrity. But according to an essay written by Patrick J. Leonard for the Canton Massachusetts Historical Society, Mann was “an imaginative hack writer” who “wrote a far from factual biography” containing “innumerable falsehoods and inaccuracies.”

Young admits that some of the material in Mann’s book is questionable, but reminds us that while it may be easy to dis-

‘the attributes needed to maintain her deception—to be alert, quick and street smart—made her an ideal choice for the light infantry.’

Enter Deborah Sampson Gannett’s name into a popular Internet search engine today, and it will likely yield thousands of results. A genuine Revolutionary War Patriot and heroine, she has also become a historical celebrity—and as is often the case with celebrities, much of what is written about her is incomplete, inaccurate and occasionally sensational.

For far too long, most of what people “knew” about Deborah Sampson Gannett was based on Herman Mann’s book about her. Published in 1797, *The Female Review; or, Memoirs*

credit Mann, Gannett “chose him to write about her, and she talked to him only a decade after the war, when her memory was clear.” Nevertheless, though Young observes that Gannett was “indebted to Mann for fleshing out the persona she had created,” he notes that, “She was stuck with his tales about her outlandish adventures among the Indians and his innuendos about her sexual life.”

The publication of Mann’s book and Gannett’s subsequent lecture tour—during which she spent almost a year on the road,

sometimes appearing in uniform, traveling alone at a time when there were almost no precedents for a woman as an itinerant lecturer—brought her fame but not fortune. It also failed to earn her a place in the history books of the day about the Revolutionary War, including those written by Mercy Otis Warren and Judith Sargent Murray. According to Young, “The female soldier was not recognized by the genteel, articulate women of Massachusetts of the Revolutionary era, the advocates of a ‘bluestocking’ kind of feminism.”

But even if she was not mentioned in 19th-century history books, Deborah Sampson Gannett, who died in 1827, was remembered and honored by some prominent Americans of that time.

On June 16, 1838, more than eight decades before the passage of the 19th Amendment guaranteed women the right to vote, John Quincy Adams—former president (1825–1829), secretary of state and senator—began an extraordinary filibuster. It lasted until the House of Representatives adjourned three weeks later. It was, Young writes, “a filibuster against [the] annexation [of Texas], against slavery, for the right of petition—and for the right of women to participate in public life, the first such speech in Congress.”

During his marathon speech, Adams invoked Deborah Sampson Gannett’s record of military service in the Revolutionary War, and on June 28, 1838, he read aloud an excerpt from a House committee report stating, “That the whole history of the American Revolution records no case like this, and ‘furnishes no other similar example of female heroism, fidelity and courage.’”

Forgotten and rediscovered many times since then, Gannett’s story has been told and retold, marginalized, sensationalized and misappropriated. Recently, historians have begun using new techniques to write accurate histories of those women who have made a mark on history but left behind little evidence. These techniques require them to act as detectives, tracking down clues in the field rather than reading papers in archives. Now, instead of viewing Deborah Gannett through the distorted lens of *The Female Review*, a much clearer image—that of a gifted, complex woman of “uncommon native intellect and fortitude”—is emerging, and in the process it is transforming our understanding of women’s roles in the American Revolution. 🍷

Nadine Goff wrote about Eliza Pinckney for the January/February 2008 issue.

Deborah, Unmasked

“We commonly form our Idea of the person whom we hear spoken off [sic], whom we have never seen; according as their actions are described, when I heard her spoken off as a Soldier, I formed the Idea of a tall, Masculine female, who had a small share of understandg [sic], without education, & one of the meanest of her Sex.—When I saw and discourse [d] with [her] I was agreeably surpris’d [sic] to find [sic] a small, effeminate and converseable [sic] Woman, whose education entitles her to a better situation in life.”

—Excerpt from a letter from Paul Revere to congressman William Eustis Esq., written after he visited Deborah Sampson Gannett at her home in Sharon, Mass., in 1804. Revere and Gannett became friends; one of her two surviving letters was written to him, asking for “the loan of ten Dollars for a Short time.”



When a woman successfully masquerades as a man, we find ourselves, like Paul Revere, wondering what she really looks like without her disguise.

Deborah Sampson Gannett’s image has been painted with both words and oils, but the pictures that emerge are often contradictory. While Revere found her “effeminate,” biographer Herman Mann offered a notably different portrait in *The Female Review*:

“Her aspect is rather masculine and serene than effeminate and silly jocose. Her waist might displease a coquette, but her limbs are regularly proportioned. Ladies of taste consider them handsome, when in the masculine garb.”

In addition to knowing Gannett personally, Mann also commissioned Massachusetts artist Joseph Stone of Framingham to paint a portrait of her for the frontispiece of his book. Patrick J. Leonard of the Canton Massachusetts Historical Society writes that the picture, now in the John Brown Museum in Providence,



R.I., “... is far from flattering ... but one does get the impression of a woman with calm level blue eyes, rather blonde hair, a prominent nose and a pugilistic chin.”

In Stone’s painting, Gannett has long hair and wears a dress. However, in 1954, when the United States Military Academy at West Point commissioned German military illustrator Herbert Knotel to create a watercolor painting of Gannett for an exhibit honoring women in the military, he depicted her in a military uniform. Historian Alfred F. Young, author of *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier*, writes that, “Deborah came out tall, thin, impossibly long-limbed, with a smiling face, pouting lips and well-coiffed hair—a cute but ridiculous figure, compatible with the Army’s expectations of women.”

Young notes that the statue of Gannett that has stood in front of the public library in Sharon, Mass., since 1989 attempts to reach a compromise about whether its subject was masculine or feminine by depicting her in a plain dress, with the coat of a Continental soldier draped over her shoulder. There is a tricornered hat in her left hand and a powderhorn in her right hand. Her left arm steadies a musket. Young speculates that the statue, created by sculptor Lu Stubbs, “can be read as a reassuring image saying that a woman can be a soldier with a gun and remain a woman in a dress—in other words, that she can ‘have it all.’”