

Women and Wagoners: Camp Followers in the American War for Independence

by Holly A. Mayer

An old tune called “The Girl I Left Behind Me” tells of a lovelorn soldier yearning to return home to his waiting fair maid. Although there is a good chance that this song was first performed during the Revolutionary War, the earliest transcripts only date to the 1790s. Even if redcoats and rebels did not whistle it in 1776, it echoes what people of the Revolutionary era believed about men honor-bound to cause, country, and home-bound consorts. The reality, however, was that not all men left to serve in the military and not all women stayed home. Over the course of the war, thousands of women, many with children, and throngs of civilian men trailed after the combating armies. Known collectively as camp followers, these men, among whom many were wagoners, and women made up a people’s army encompassing civilians as well as soldiers. The majority of these civilians were hard-working, though not necessarily heroic, contributors to military life and operations. Acknowledging their presence expands our image of the Continental Army and our understanding of civilian contributions to waging the Revolution’s war.



This 1876 Currier and Ives print, “The Heroine of Monmouth . . . June 28, 1778,” depicts Molly Pitcher taking over her husband’s gun after he was killed during the American Revolution. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

Followers, especially the female followers, have seldom rated much mention in histories of the War for American Independence, perhaps because most women and girls did stay behind tending to farms and businesses or sheltering with friends and relatives. Society tended to applaud those who stayed behind as fitting feminine heroes—heroines—who sustained the home front. Such applause helped build and identify girls’ and women’s proper activities and social sphere. That was certainly the case in America as later generations used the founding era to determine standards by which to judge what was appropriate for American women. Although the representations are not fully aligned with the reality of women’s wartime challenges and roles, especially those defined by race, the Revolution produced at least two iconic female stereotypes: the first, what today may be called the “American Girl,” was usually young, “free,” and engaged in adventure; the second, the “Republican Mother,” was married or maternal and showed her brave spirit by serving others. While later generations created the popular image of the camp follower as the free-spirited “American Girl,” in reality more “Republican Mothers” may have filled that role.

A sample of recent children’s histories about female fortitude in the Revolution reflects both of the above images as well as changes and continuities in the depictions of women and girls. Such examples of history for children, especially when read one right after the other, reveal a ritual recitation of the female models of revolutionary spirit. Modern works include Native American and African American role models, such as Nancy Ward and Phillis Wheatley, but the focus remains on white women, though notably diverse by age, rank, and marital status. There are the “patriots in petticoats,” such as Esther DeBardt Reed,

governor's wife and fundraiser; Lydia Darragh, Quaker informant; Nancy Hart, frontier sharpshooter; and Sybil Ludington, the teenaged female Paul Revere. Margaret Corbin and Mary Ludwig Hays, both followers called "Molly," also figure prominently. In an interesting switch from earlier nineteenth- and twentieth-century accounts, however, the cross-dressing Deborah Sampson, who enlisted as the soldier Robert Shurtliff, now appears to receive greater accolades as society accepts women in trousers and celebrates those serving in uniform.

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The legend of Molly Pitcher is one example of a later popular image eclipsing historical reality. Pitcher manifested the "American Girl" stereotype—the camp follower wife of a soldier who took up her husband's gun when he was wounded in battle. But the apocryphal "Molly Pitcher" aside, female camp followers were rarely extolled in song or story. They were more likely to be ridiculed for not being decorous, self-denying wives, sisters, daughters, just as popular songs and verse were likely to deride men who chose not to become self-sacrificing soldiers. Camp followers were a problem for they muddied the image of the orderly, virtuous society that the Revolutionaries were trying to create.

Revolutionary America declared that women were to stay at home, for the home was exalted during wartime as the embodiment of peace. When women made their homes with the Army they undermined idealized images of femininity and domestic life. Senior officers' wives were the exception. Thus Martha Washington, Catharine Greene, and Lucy Knox appeared in stories as models of rectitude, noble republican womanhood, visiting camps during the winter, bringing cheer, clothes, and food for their husbands. These "ladies" then got out of the way by going home at the opening of the campaign season. What is rarely mentioned is that their presence in the Army camp strained the military's ability to house and provision them just as the presence of ordinary camp followers did.

Among the "ordinary" women with the Army were a few "American girl" types who disguised themselves as soldiers or, still in skirts, fought at critical times. Most adult female followers, however, provided a rough representation of republican motherhood, as they helped spouses and other family members during wartime and, in the peace years that followed, nurtured virtue in the new republic and public-spiritedness in its male citizens.

Although the followers took up some measure of the Army's time, space, and supplies, most of the women gave back by cooking, cleaning, and caring for the troops. Some followers served officers and their visiting wives. General George Washington, for example relied heavily on Elizabeth Thompson, an Irish woman who accepted employment as his housekeeper and followed him to various encampments until 1779–1780. Benedict Arnold employed a sergeant major's wife as a housekeeper at West Point before he deserted. Numerous orders and regulations, however, indicate that doing laundry was the primary paying job for women.

Nursing was also service with pay, and it too generally meant caring for the troops by cleaning. These nurses were not professionals trained to dispense medicines and bandage wounds, although some probably added those duties, but followers and hired employees drawn from camp and neighboring communities. They washed patients, swept floors, and emptied chamber pots. Without the help of these women both the American and British Armies would have had to hire or assign men to these chores—and that meant diminishing the ranks of soldiers. Nursing was hard and even dangerous work. Germs rather than enemy fire brought the danger, and women, like men, wound up in the military hospitals suffering from the sicknesses, such as smallpox, that swept through the camps.

Military commanders worried that followers might spread instead of limit disease and disorder. Officers

fretted about prostitution and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. They also worried that followers might undermine security and increase crime. A few women did enter camp lines to spy for the enemy, and a few did prod men to challenge their officers or to desert. Some did take things that belonged to the Army or steal from soldiers or civilians. Most female followers, however, were not prostitutes, provocateurs, spies, or thieves, and the Army constantly worked to ensure that by checking that they were legitimately related to the men in the Army and by regulating what they did.

Because commanders recorded followers on company ration rosters and recorded orders relating to the conduct of the followers, historians can estimate their number in the thousands. Unfortunately, because the records are not complete, the exact numbers of women followers (or other family members) has not been determined. We do know that the numbers changed over time and differed according to where regiments recruited and served. It appears that there was an average of one woman to every thirty or thirty-five soldiers in the Continental Army (not the militias) during the war, and that suggests that anywhere from 3,000 to 7,000 women may have followed the Army at some time or other over the eight years of the conflict.

The numbers of other followers are as difficult, if not more so, to gauge because those followers did not always show up on ration lists or regimental roles. On the other hand, we know that these children, servants, slaves, and male civilians were there because they figured in military law, organizational plans, commands, and personal letters. Like most of the women, the children, personal servants, and slaves in camp came under the heading of retainers to the camp. They were attached to and served individual officers and soldiers. Israel Trask was an officer's son who joined the army as a waiter, drawing rations and wages as an officer's servant. Many other boys and men worked as private servants, some of them for wages and others as slaves. The most famous slave was Washington's Bill or Billy Lee. More African American laborers appear to have worked for the British forces (which offered freedom to slaves who ran away from rebel masters rebelling against the Crown). Yet American and allied French officers readily employed them as personal servants as well as laborers. A few of these retainers to the camp became soldiers, and others, like the nurses already mentioned, ended up serving with the Army when they accepted employment in the Hospital Department.

Many men chose to work for the Hospital or other staff departments, among which the big ones were the Commissary and Quartermaster, rather than enlisting into the ranks. In putting their personal preferences for certain kinds of work, higher wages, and limited terms over low-paid, long-term, line-of-fire soldiering, they did not exactly fulfill the image of the worthy man putting aside his own desires for the common good. Some of these male followers then, like the female followers, also disturbed the image of the orderly, virtuous society that the revolutionaries idealized. So, as with the female followers, history books both for adults and children reflect that both in what and whom they put in and leave out of the story.

They were part of the reality of the Revolutionary War however. Many, though not all, of the contractors, clerks, animal handlers, and dispatch riders that the staff departments employed were civilians. The same can be said about the wagoners, some of whom were African Americans, found in those departments and with every regiment. In 1780 the Wagon Department alone had over a hundred enlisted and a few civilian wagon masters, over 300 enlisted wagoners, and almost another 300 civilian wagoners. Some of the wagoners had enlisted directly into that job whereas others were drawn from the ranks. These drivers, moving their teams and wagons loaded with provisions and equipment, were essential to Army operations, but it may be that because they were so important their offenses and failures became magnified. As a group, they had the reputation of being untrustworthy and unreliable, of stealing supplies and stealing away. Unfortunately group infamy meant that the good individuals were not always recognized. Yet, whether good or not so good, wagoners were necessary, and the Army could

never find enough of them to hire or enlist and it could never keep enough of them.

Knowledge of the camp followers is important for it generates an awareness of who was ignored, merely mentioned, or celebrated in the past—and when and why that happened. Were some people ignored in contemporary accounts and in later histories because they did not “fit” the picture being constructed or because they were just doing what was considered normal rather than noteworthy? Why, at various times, have researchers dug the unheralded people out of the records and presented them for notice? Perhaps it is because so many of us want to know, to quote the radio commentator Paul Harvey, “the rest of the story.” It may also be that we need to recognize not only those who did what was extraordinary but also those who simply continued to do their duty under the most challenging of circumstances. Thousands of camp followers did exactly that, and in doing so helped the Continental Army survive and win the War for American Independence.

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