Deborah Sampson Biography

Born December 17, 1760
Plympton, Massachusetts
Died April 29, 1827
Sharon, Massachusetts

Farmer, soldier, public speaker

"Wrought upon ... by an enthusiasm and frenzy ... did I throw off the soft [clothing] of my sex, and assume those of the warrior."

Portrait: Deborah Sampson. Reproduced by permission of the Rhode Island Historical Society/Women in Military Service Memorial Foundation.

Disguised as a man, Deborah Sampson served admirably as a soldier in the Continental army during the American Revolutionary War (1775–83) and later gave speeches about her time in the military. She established a public presence for women that went far beyond the normal cultural limits of her time. The former soldier then went on to become a wife and mother. She asked for and received a military pension (money benefits) from the U.S. government, also unheard of for a woman of her time.

Deborah Sampson was born on December 17, 1760, to a poor family in Plympton, Massachusetts (located near Plymouth, Massachusetts). Her father, Jonathan Sampson Jr., deserted his family to go to sea. His wife, Deborah Bradford Sampson, a descendant of esteemed Massachusetts governor William Bradford, was later informed that her husband had perished in a shipwreck.

When Sampson was only five her mother became ill. No longer able to care for her children, Deborah Bradford Sampson gave them up to live with other families. After being shuffled from family to family, eight-year-old Deborah was sent to the farm of a church assistant, Deacon Thomas, near Middleborough, Massachusetts. There she entered into a legal agreement to work for the family for several years in exchange for food and lodging.

The farmer's family treated Sampson kindly. While living with them, the strong-willed young woman developed skills as a farmhand and an appreciation of nature. She plowed the fields, spread fertilizer, milked cows, stacked hay, and became a skilled carpenter. The deacon believed strongly in the importance of education—even for girls—and allowed Sampson to attend classes with his boys.

Posing as a man, Sampson enlists

In 1778, at the age of eighteen, Sampson was released by law from serving the Thomases and began working at other farms in the area. She borrowed newspapers and learned about the American Revolution, which was then in progress. At age twenty the young woman took a position as a part-time teacher at the Middleborough School, where she insisted that the girls learn as much as the boys. Although released from service to the Thomases, she continued to live at their home, doing chores part time, raising her own sheep and chickens, and selling cloth she had woven.

Sampson was patriotic and loved adventure. About five feet, eight inches tall, she was a heavy-boned young woman with a long, narrow face, blonde hair, and blue eyes. In 1782 twenty-one-year-old Sampson decided to do something very unusual. One story says that with twelve dollars she had saved she bought fabric and fashioned for herself a man's suit. Another says that she had a local tailor make a suit for a man in her size. In any event, she left her teaching job, claiming she was going to accept a better position.

In March 1782 the British Parliament voted to put an end to the fighting in America. British soldiers remained in America, however, and the Continental army was ordered to stay together until a peace
treaty was signed (it was signed on September 3, 1783). Young men were hesitant to join the army because there was no guarantee they would be paid their wages on a regular basis. Immediate cash payments, called bounties, were sometimes offered to entice them to join. Some men signed up, waited until they were paid the bounty, then abandoned their positions. Then they signed up again in another location, to receive yet another bounty.

In the spring of 1782, Sampson dressed in male clothing, cut her hair to shoulder length, and tied it back in the fashion of men of that time. Near Middleborough, she went to an army recruiting office, where men signed up for military duty. But it was not long before her act of deception was discovered. According to one version of the story, she was leaving a tavern with a group of soldiers when a local woman recognized her despite the uniform. Sampson was forced to return the unused part of the bounty she had been paid, and was forbidden ever to re-enter the local recruiting office. Women then had not been granted the right to serve in the military.

Repeats the deception

But Sampson, who had enjoyed the freedom of her experience of passing as a man, did not abandon her plan to join the army. In May 1782 she traveled to Bellingham, Massachusetts. Using the first and middle name of her oldest brother (who had died before her birth), Robert Shurtleff, Sampson enlisted in the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. Apparently the young woman's appearance caused no suspicion, and she was sent to Worcester, Massachusetts, along with several other recruits.

Determined to continue the military career she had come to love, Sampson altered her uniform and her body shape. She flattened her chest by wrapping it tightly with cloth. When a fellow soldier saw her and questioned why a man knew how to sew, she claimed that she had learned the skill because there were no girls in her family. Since she had no whiskers, Sampson was nicknamed "Molly" or "the blooming boy." Her lack of a beard was not considered unusual, as many soldiers in the Revolutionary War were too young to shave.

In the early summer of 1782, Sampson's military unit was sent to West Point, New York, to fight as foot soldiers and flush out Tories in nearby East Chester, New York. Tories were colonists who stayed loyal to Great Britain during the time of the American Revolution. Unwilling to admit that their cause had been lost, the Tories were still causing trouble in New York.

Deborah Sampson—disguised as a man—served in several military units, including the Light Infantry Division. Reproduced by permission of Archive Photos, Inc.

In the spring of 1782, General George Washington (see entry) had established his headquarters at Newburgh, New York, fourteen miles north of West Point. In nearby New Windsor, the main force of the Continental army, 9,000 strong, was stationed.

Makes her mark as a soldier

As Robert Shurtleff, Sampson drilled and marched. Her sturdy body allowed her to do the hard physical labor of setting up camp and rigging defenses. The young woman was an excellent shot and was assigned to a special group in the Light Infantry Division called the Rangers, light infantry soldiers who fought on foot. The Rangers sometimes acted as spies and brought back information on enemy activities.

As part of her duties Sampson was sent on scouting and raiding expeditions. She slept on a wooden bunk in a tent with five other soldiers. To avoid having her gender detected, she changed her clothes in the dark and saved her trips to the outdoor toilet for nighttime. During one clash with the Tories, Sampson received two shots through the coat and one through the cap. Another time she was slashed
on the left side of her face with a sword, but she behaved as though the wound was a mere scratch so she could avoid being examined by a doctor.

**Survives ambush attack**

To keep up her deception, Sampson avoided making close friends. But she was very attractive, and several young women who visited her military camp fell in love with the young soldier. Sampson was careful to politely reject such interest.

In the summer of 1782, Sampson was wounded in the thigh by a musket ball and carried to an aid station for medical help. Fearing the surgeon who came to examine her would penetrate her disguise, she said that her only wound was a slight scratch on the head. He treated her for that and released her.

When safely alone, Sampson used a penknife to probe her thigh for the musket ball that had injured her. It is not known whether or not she was able to remove it, but the young woman suffered terribly and returned to duty before she had fully recovered. The wound bothered her for the rest of her life.

**Becomes general’s aide**

In November 1782 Sampson went with her company to Fort Ticonderoga, New York, where she fought against some Native Americans who were fighting in support of the Tories. The natives thought the Tories would later help them keep their traditional lands out of the hands of American colonists. Impressed with her energetic attitude, General John Paterson made Sampson his personal assistant. The young soldier now had a small room of her own and slept in a feather bed. Each day she cleaned the general's boots, polished his swords, arranged his clothing, prepared food for him, and went on errands.

On April 19, 1783, American soldiers were elated to hear General George Washington's announcement of "the cessation of hostilities between the United States of America and the King of Great Britain." When Sampson heard the news, she had mixed feelings. She knew that America's final victory would mean her return to her former life.

**Catches malaria; doctor discovers her secret**

At war's end, Sampson went with her military unit to Philadelphia. While exploring in the area, she caught the infectious disease malaria. Suffering with a fever, she drifted in and out of consciousness. At one point, funeral planners were discussing where to take her body. Fortunately, Dr. Barnabas Binney was then attending the young soldier. When he saw his patient struggling to regain consciousness, he told the funeral workers to leave.

Dr. Binney soon discovered his patient was not male but female. He said nothing of his discovery to Sampson, thinking perhaps that because she was barely conscious, she did not realize he knew. He revealed her secret only to a woman who helped with the treatment of patients, asking her not to reveal the soldier's gender. When Sampson's condition improved, Dr. Binney had her moved to his own home, where she was nursed back to health by Dr. Binney's niece.

**Travels west then returns to Philadelphia**

After recovering, Sampson returned to her army duties, joining a group of soldiers for a journey to survey rocks and minerals in a remote region of Virginia. After arriving there she suffered a relapse of her illness and spent some time with a group of friendly Indians while her comrades continued their journey. When she recovered, Sampson returned to Philadelphia to say goodbye to Dr. Binney. Sampson departed Philadelphia and headed to West Point where her regiment, the Fourth Massachusetts, was to be disbanded.
Military career ends; resumes civilian life

There are conflicting stories concerning Sampson's visit with Dr. Binney and what happened afterward. In one version of the story, Dr. Binney did not reveal to Sampson that he knew her gender, but asked her to carry a letter for him to her West Point commander, Major General John Paterson. All accounts seem to agree that during her trip to West Point, a violent storm capsized the boat on which Sampson was a passenger. Her trunk full of clothing, along with her diary, landed at the bottom of the Hudson River. Sampson survived and continued her journey.

The story then goes on to say that the letter from Dr. Binney to General Paterson praised Sampson’s intelligence and morals and revealed the fact that she was a woman. General Paterson sent the young woman, still in men's clothing, with a letter to deliver to General George Washington. Washington gave Sampson a copy of papers showing that she had served in the military with honor but was now discharged.

Whatever version is true, Deborah Sampson's career in the Continental army came to an end in October 1783. Sampson journeyed toward Boston, stopping at her uncle's farm in Stoughton, Massachusetts. She worked there as a farmhand, wearing men's clothing, including part of her uniform. In the spring of 1784 she began to wear skirts again.

Receives pension from State of Massachusetts

In April 1784 Sampson married Benjamin Gannett, a farmer from Sharon, Massachusetts, whom she met while working at her uncle's farm. The couple had two daughters and a son who, like his mother, became a soldier. Because Sampson's war wound began to act up, she could only do limited farm work.

When Sampson's story leaked out, she got a variety of reactions. Some people respected her for her exploits; others thought her behavior outrageous. For the rest of her life, she wore her uniform during veterans' parades (veterans are ex-soldiers).

In January 1792 Sampson petitioned the government of Massachusetts for back pay that she had never received from the army. Her petition was approved and signed by John Hancock (see entry), the governor of Massachusetts. According to a document issued by the General Court of Massachusetts, Sampson "did actually perform the duty of a soldier in the late army of the United States ... for which she has received no compensation ... [she] exhibited an extraordinary instance of female heroism by discharging the duties of a faithful gallant soldier, and at the same time preserving the virtue and chastity of her sex unsuspected and unblemished."

Seeks payment from federal government

Despite her pay from the state of Massachusetts, the Gannett family went on struggling and living the life of the poor. In 1797 the story of Sampson's life was published under the title The Female Review. In 1802 Sampson hired a writer to compose a speech about her life. She traveled about New England giving the speech, hoping to use the publicity from the lectures to help gain a soldier's pension from the U.S. government.

In the early 1800s Sampson met patriot Paul Revere (see entry), by then an old man. Revere had become famous in 1775 for riding his horse from Boston to Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, to warn the patriots of the coming of British soldiers. Revere told Sampson he would use his influence to try and get her a government pension. In 1804 Revere wrote a letter to a Massachusetts congressman in which he commended Sampson as "a woman of handsome talents, good morals, a dutiful wife, and an affectionate parent." He also mentioned that she was not in good health.
In response, in 1805 the U.S. Congress granted Sampson a monthly pension of $4 for being injured in the performance of a soldier's duties. The pension allowed the Gannetts to buy a house on their farmland and do some landscaping of the property. The pension was doubled in 1818.

**Remembered after death**

Sampson died in 1827 and was buried near her home. Four years later her husband Benjamin, then in poor health, appealed to the U.S. Congress for the continuance of his wife's pension for himself. But at that time there was no law giving pensions to army widows, much less widowers. Gannett re-applied in 1836 after Congress passed such an act. He submitted a bill of six hundred dollars as evidence of the medical bills his wife's war wounds had cost the family. By then, Benjamin was very poor, and his two daughters had to depend on charity for their support.

Seven years later the U.S. government paid Sampson's heirs $466.66, as Benjamin Gannett had died eleven months earlier. In granting the money, the Committee on Revolutionary Pensions stated: "The whole history of the American Revolution records no case like this, and furnishes no other similar example of female heroism, fidelity, and courage." The committee writers added "there cannot be a parallel case in all time."

Many versions of Sampson's story have appeared in the more than two centuries since the war's end. But the basic facts of her life are well documented, and she continues to be recognized for her assertiveness and courage. Sampson was paid a special honor during World War II (1939–45) when a warship was christened the *Deborah Sampson Gannett* and launched at Baltimore, Maryland, on April 10, 1944. It was dedicated to "the sole female soldier of the American Revolution."

"Wrought upon ... by an enthusiasm and frenzy ... did I throw off the soft [clothing] of my sex, and assume those of the warrior."

**Portrait: Deborah Sampson. Reproduced by permission of the** Rhode Island Historical Society/Women in Military Service Memorial Foundation.