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DEBORAH SAMPSON

SOLDIER OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION



Deborah Sampson (b. 17 Dec 1760 d. 29 Apr 1827) was a remarkable woman serving in the Continental Army in the Revolutionary war. She disguised herself as a man.

"Amazing Women in War and Peace History raves about the heroics of men in war... but few instances are mentioned in which female courage was displayed. Yet during every conflict, and the peaceful years between they too were there. In the beginning of the America we know there was a Revolution. And although the call to arms was for men, several women donned the uniform of a Revolutionary soldier and fought against the British. One of these women was Deborah Sampson." (While "SAMPSON" is the generally used spelling, the spelling "SAMSON" has also been said to be the correct spelling.)

Genealogy is much more than written names, dates, places on a sheet of paper. Every now and then, by some quirk of fate, an ancestor appears in the family from what seems to be out of nowhere. And such began the story of how Deborah Sampson, the woman who fought with the Massachusetts troops in the Revolutionary War disguised as a man, came to be in my family history. Actually, I didn't find Deborah....rather she found me.

My first introduction to Deborah began very recently when I was contacted by an Eggleston cousin in California who found me a few months ago from a message board posting I had placed on my Eggleston family. A few weeks ago, I received another email from him mentioning this Deborah Sampson and thought she was related. Up to that point, I had never heard of Deborah. In the meantime, I had come in contact with Sam Behling and "Notable Women Ancestors"; so I figured she might like to know about this Deborah Sampson and forwarded Deborah on to Sam, not thinking anything more about it, only to learn that the ghost of Deborah had apparently become

determined to get herself included in "Notable Women Ancestors". About three weeks prior to my contact with Sam Behling, Sam herself had received other contacts about Deborah.

Being outnumbered by Deborah herself, two cousins, and a lady unknown, and Sam Behling, I figured the spirits of fate that be were in control and I cried "Uncle" and surrendered to taking on the task of getting Deborah Sampson onto "Notable Women". I went out to the Virginia Beach Library one Thursday evening shortly thereafter with all intense purpose of attending the Virginia Beach Genealogical Society meeting and no thought of ghost Deborah. As fate would have it (or ghost Deborah, whichever be the case), I apparently misread the calendar and found myself at the Library a week late for the meeting! What else does one do with idle time mistakenly incurred but browse among the books in search of Deborah Sampson's story, of course, which I delightfully found and brought home to read. I strangely suspected that Deborah had taken control of my life and, with just a tad bit o' patience, Deborah would find her way to Sam's "Notable Women Ancestors."

I was soon to learn that Deborah Sampson's mother, Deborah (Bradford) Sampson, and my 5th Great Grandmother Hannah Bradford, daughter of Elisha Bradford and Bathsheba LeBrocke, were sisters. Bradford *Mayflower Families in Progress* (Fourth Edition), published by the General Society of Mayflower Descendants, p. 86, provides the lineage of Deborah Sampson. Using Plympton Records B.2 pp. 540-576-718, Bradford Bible at Pilgrim Hall and Plymouth Records, Lucy Freeman and Alma Bond, Ph.D. in *America's First Woman Warrior, The Courage of Deborah Sampson* also provide a genealogical chart showing Deborah Sampson's lineage from Mayflower Pilgrims [Captain Miles Standish and John and Priscilla \(Mullins\) Alden](#).

Deborah Sampson, born in Plympton, Massachusetts (originally called Winnetuxet) on a wintry day - December 17, 1760 - as the oldest of three daughters and three sons of Jonathan and Deborah Sampson, was the first known American woman to impersonate a man in order to join the army and take part in combat. Deborah's ancestral line descends down from Plymouth Colony Governor William Bradford of the Mayflower through Governor Bradford's son Joseph Bradford and Jael Hobart, Elisha Bradford and Bathsheba LeBrocke.

Lucy Freeman and Alma Bond, Ph. D., in their book *America's First Woman Warrior*, describes Deborah's grandmother, Bathsheba (LeBrocke) Bradford as "a young French woman of beauty and elegance" and "was to have an innovative influence on her life and subsequent choice of career." Of this influence on Deborah's life, they further write [*America's First Woman Warrior*, Lucy Freeman and

Alma Bond, Paragon House 1992, p. 70]:

"Deborah's grandmother, the spirited Bathsheba, was very close to her daughter Deborah, often visited her grandchildren in Plympton. She spoiled young Deborah outrageously, according to Deborah's mother, as Deborah, with her bright mind and warm, affectionate nature, became Bathsheba's favorite. Deborah remembered her grandmother telling her many times in her French accent the inspiring story of the heroine of France, Joan of Arc, the Maid of Orleans who in a pair of breeches led the French army to victory over the British. She was burned at the stake for her bravery because she insisted she was responsible only to God and not to the hypocritical rulers of the church."

This close relationship with her grandmother, Bathsheba (LeBrocke) Bradford, no doubt, may have had a profound influence later in Deborah's decision to enlist disguised as a man and serve with the Massachusetts Troops in the Revolutionary War. She was also a great granddaughter of one of Plympton's first settlers, Isaac Sampson. Isaac had sailed from Leyden, Holland in 1629 - his brother Henry Sampson having sailed over on the Mayflower.

Lucy Freeman and Alma Bond [*America's First Woman Warrior*, Paragon House 1992, p. 87] further write: "Deborah, in a sense, was born to war. She had listened to many a conversation between her mother and grandmother about how the war had affected the Bradfords. Governor Bradford's son, William, commander of the Plymouth forces in King Phillip's War, was hit at the thigh by a musket ball, which he carried the rest of his life." Deborah Sampson's mother's sister, Hannah Bradford, and her spouse Joshua Bradford had both been killed and scalped on 22 May 1758 in the Indian attack on Meduncook (Friendship), Maine. I'm told that, according to local history, Chief Moxus led the attack. Joshua, grinding corn outside early that morning, did not hear the warning shots. Having saved the life of the Chief when he was drowning near the Bradford house, because of the gratitude the Chief had expressed, Joshua did not fear the local Indians and had not moved his family inside the Fort as his neighbors had. At least two of the their children were captured and taken into Canada where they were held captive until Quebec was taken by Gen. Wolf and they returned home. One of the daughters is said to have been rescued by one of the soldiers from the Fort after she received a vicious wound in the attack - supposedly severed ribs from her spine. Quite possibly my 5th Great Grandmother Hannah Bradford and the rest of the Bradford children were inside the Fort when the attack occurred about half an hour past sunrise and thus spared their lives, however, I have not seen any primary source documentation specifically stating whether they were inside the Fort or inside the Bradford house when the attack occurred. The attack

was reported by a whaleboat coming up from Meduncook and the original report is recorded in the Boston obits.

Captain Simeon Sampson, a cousin of Deborah's father, had been held hostage during the French and Indian Wars and had escaped the enemy by dressing as a woman. Deborah would later recall how, at the age of 4 years, she had asked Captain Sampson if she could be his cabin boy, to which she was met with rejecting laughter because she was a girl. These events which were so well-known by Deborah in her youth, surely must have had a profound influence on a determined Deborah's scheme to disguise herself as a man in order to enlist in the Revolutionary War.

Deborah's youth was spent in poverty. Her father having abandoned the family when he went off to sea, the poor health and inability to support the family forced Deborah's mother to send the children off to live with various neighbors and relatives. At the age of five and a half years, Deborah went to live with her mother's cousin, Ruth Fuller, in Middleborough, Massachusetts. Upon Ruth's death, Deborah, now age 8 years, went to live with Mrs. Peter Thacher, widow of the minister of First Congregational Church of Middleborough Massachusetts, where she worked hard without complaint. At the young age of ten, Sampson became an indentured servant in the household of Benjamin Thomas with his wife and eight sons until the age of 18 years. For the remainder of her youth, she helped with the housework and worked in the field. Hard labor developed her physical strength. In winter, when there wasn't as much farm work to be done, she was able to attend school. Among the various accomplishments which she learned while living in the Thomas household were the arts of spinning and weaving, cooking, the handling of farm equipments - and how to handle a musket. Often going on hunting ventures with the Thomas sons, Deborah became as proficient at shooting as the boys. She learned enough skills so that after her servitude ended in 1779, she was hired as a teacher in a Middleborough public school.

The start of the Revolutionary War from the peeling of the First Presbyterian Church tower bell on December 16, 1775 to the meeting hall where it was announced "that Boston patriots--Paul Revere and John Hancock among them--disguised as Indians dumped tea belonging to the East India Company into the harbor" [*America's First Woman Warrior*, Lucy Freeman and Alma Bond, Paragon House 1992, p. 80] to the famous ride of Paul Revere to the sounds of the British guns which Deborah could hear as they fired on Bunker Hill, Deborah's destiny with her decision to fight in the war became ever clearer. She had grown up with conflict, but in the winter of 1780 at Sprout's Tavern, Deacon Thomas arrived telling of the death of his two sons who were fighting with the Marquis de Lafayette in Virginia. Grief-stricken for the boys she had come to love as brothers brought

Deborah another step closer to her destiny in the Revolution.

Selma R. Williams in *Demeter's Daughters, The Women Who Founded America 1587-1787*, pages 241-243 writes:

"Eliabeth Ellet, who compiled the first list of heroines and spies in 1848, found 160 women who qualified. Most conspicuous in this category was nineteen-year-old Deborah Sampson, who disguised herself as a boy "Timothy Thayer" and joined the Continental Army. She had no trouble entering the ranks in clothing borrowed from one Samuel Leonard.....However, somehow she was recognized and forced to return to civilian life."

Interestingly, Lucy Freeman and Alma Bond, Ph.D. in *America's First Woman Warrior: The Courage of Deborah Sampson*, p. 89-90, portray Deborah, then residing in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Leonard, coming to her final decision to attempt the disguise. Donning the clothes of Mr. and Mrs. Leonard's son, Samuel, who had already left for the war, Deborah's plan would be test her disguise by visiting a fortune teller at Sproat Tavern. Once assured the fortune teller did not recognize Deborah, she proceeded to enlist in the army using the fictitious name Timothy Thayer of Carver. Perhaps, had the comment made by a Mrs. Wood as Deborah signed the Articles of Enlistment - "Thayer holds the quill with his finger in that funny position, like Deborah Sampson" - not gone unnoticed, the course of Deborah's future may have forever been altered that day.

On May 20, 1782, when she was twenty-one, Sampson enlisted in the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment of the Continental Army at Bellingham as a man named Robert Shurtleff (also listed as Shirtliff or Shurtleff), taking the name of her mother's first-born child, Robert Shurtleff Sampson, who had deceased at the age of 8 years. Deborah's mother had continued to grieve the loss of her first born son, Robert, and this was perhaps another reason for Deborah to gain her mother's admiration in Robert's place by enlisting to fight in the Revolutionary War. On May 20th. 1782, she signed the "Articles of Enlistment" for a three year enlistment which were presented to her at Worcester and was mustered three days later into Captain George Webb's company.

The National Geographic article written by Lonnelle Aikman entitled *Patriots in Petticoats*, Vol. 148, No. 4, Oct. 1975 reads: "From then on, Deborah Sampson's adventures rivaled fiction, later filling a 1797 biography by Herman Mann, *The Female Review: or, Memoirs of an American Young Lady*. Her strength and firm chin, shown in a contemporary portrait, explain how she passed for a "smock-faced" boy, too young to grow a beard. Being 5 foot 7 inches tall, she looked tall for a woman and she had bound her breasts tightly to approximate a male physique. Other soldiers teased her about not having to shave,



but they assumed that this "boy" was just too young to grow facial hair. She performed her duties as well as any other man. On November 12, 1780, Deborah had renounced the Puritan religion and, subsequently, joined the Baptist Church. Rumors circulating back home about her activities and she was excommunicated from the First Baptist Church of Middleborough, Massachusetts, because of a strong suspicion that she was "dressing in man's clothes and enlisting as a Soldier in the Army." At the time of her excommunication, her regiment had already left Massachusetts.

Sampson was sent with her regiment to West Point, New York, where she apparently was wounded in the leg in a battle near Tarrytown. She tended her own wounds so that her gender would not be discovered. As a result, her leg never healed properly. Having served at West Point for eighteen months and participating in several battles, Deborah was wounded twice on raids along the Hudson. In a skirmish near Tarrytown, she suffered a sword cut to the head, and at Eastchester she took a bullet in her thigh that troubled her the rest of her life. Army records apparently confirm these details of Deborah's military service. Her sexual identity went undetected until she came down with a "malignant fever", then prevalent among the soldiers, and was sent to a hospital in Philadelphia where the attending physician, Dr. Binney, of Philadelphia, discovered her charade, but said nothing. Instead he took her to his own home where she would receive better care. When her health was restored, the doctor met with the commanding officer and subsequently an order was issued for Robert Shirtliffe to carry a letter to General Washington.

When the order came for her to deliver a letter into the hands of the Commander-in-Chief, she knew that her deception was over. She presented herself at the headquarters of Washington, trembling with dread and uncertainty. General Washington, to spare her embarrassment, said nothing. Instead, he sent her with an aide to have some refreshments, then summoned her back. In silence Washington handed Deborah Sampson a discharge from the service, a note with some words of advice, and a sum of money sufficient to bear her expenses home.

Deborah Sampson was honorably discharged from the army at West Point on October 25, 1783 by General Henry Knox and after the war, in 1784, married Benjamin Gannett of Sharon; they had three children - Earl, Mary and Patience - and lived a life of meager existence with her family.

Selma R. Williams in *Demeter's Daughters, The Women Who Founded America 1587-1787* writes:

"Besides her unusual wartime career got special recognition in the

1790s. On January 20, 1792, the Massachusetts General Court voted to pay her 34 pounds for past services in the United States army where she 'did actually perform the duty of a soldier.' The all-male legislature added approvingly: 'The said Deborah 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, and was discharged from the service with a fair and honorable character....''

She also taught at a nearby school. In 1802, Sampson traveled throughout New England and New York giving lectures on her experiences in the military. During her lectures, she wore the military uniform. During George Washington's presidency she received a letter inviting Robert Shirtliffe, or rather Mrs. Gannett, to visit Washington. About nine years after her discharge from the army, she was awarded a pension from the state of Massachusetts in the amount of thirty-four pounds in a lump payment. After Paul Revere sent a letter to Congress on her behalf in 1804, she began receiving a U.S. pension in the amount of four dollars per month. During her stay at the capital, a bill was passed granting her a pension, in addition to certain lands, which she was to receive as an acknowledgment for her services to the country in a military capacity as a Revolutionary Soldier. The abstract of Deborah Sampson's, alias Robert Shurtleff's, pension is found in *Genealogical Abstracts of Revolutionary War Pension Files Volume II: F-M*, Abstracted by Virgil D. White, The National Historical Publishing Company, 1991, 1305 which reads:

"GANNET, Deborah alias Robert Shurtleff, 832622, MA line, this lady enl under the name of Robert Shurtleff & was wounded in 1783 & she rec'd a pension under the act of 18 Mar 1818 & had previously been pensioned by the state of MA, she had m Benjamin Gannett on 7 Apr 1784 & she d 29 Apr 1826 & he rec'd a pension from 4 Mar 1831 at \$80 per annum for life, a P. Parsons stated she lived in the family of Benjamin Gannett more that 46 yrs after he m Deborah Sampson at his father's in Sharon MAY, they lived at Sharon in Norfolk Co MA, the said Deborah was the daughter of Jonathan Sampson who was b 3 Apr 1729 at plympton MA & her mother was also named Deborah who was the daughter of Elisha Bradford of Kingston MA & her parents were m 27 Oct 1751, she (the sol Deborah) was the granddaughter of Isaac Sampson one of the 1st settlers of Plympton MA, her husband Benjain Gannett d in Jan 1837 & in 1838 final payment was made to Earl B. Gannett, Mary Gilbert & Patience Gay ."

Deborah Sampson Gannett died April 29, 1827 in Sharon, Massachusetts, at age sixty-six. Her children were awarded compensation by a special act of Congress "for the relief of the heirs of Deborah Gannett, a soldier of the Revolution, deceased." Selma R.

Williams in *Demeter's Daughters, The Women Who Founded America 1587-1787* writes, "After her death on April 29, 1827, at the age of sixty-seven, her husband petitioned Congress for an increased pension, on the grounds that he had burdensome medical bills as a result of her service-connected sickness. A year after his death, Congress on July 7, 1838, responded with an "Act for the relief of the heirs of Deborah Gannett, a soldier of the Revolution," paying a total sum of \$466.66 to her three children.

Patrick J. Leonard, Canton Massachusetts Historical Society, writes that Deborah Sampson, alias Robert Shurtleff, soldier of the American Revolution, was honored in a proclamation signed by Governor Michael J. Dukakis on May 23, 1983 to be the "Official Heroine of the State of Massachusetts" -

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Other Web sites:

["Canton Massachusetts Historical Society DEBORAH SAMSON OFFICIAL HEROINE OF THE STATE OF MASSACHUSETTS"](#)

["Kids Connection" - THE BRONX MALL Kids Connection - District 10](#)

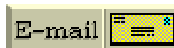
["Deborah Sampson" by Chris](#)

["Amazing Women in War and Peace", Women Soldiers in the American Revolutionary War](#)

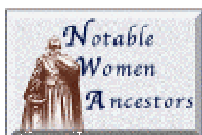
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