

22 Revolutionary Women and Children

Fighting Food

It was usually women (or children) who cooked for the soldiers. This is how to make biscuit, or hardtack—try it yourself. It doesn't have much to recommend it except a long shelf life, but all you need is flour and water.

Add enough water to some flour to make a soft (but not sticky) dough. Punch and work the dough for about 10 minutes (this will give you strong arm muscles). The dough will become like bubblegum: elastic. Roll it out $\frac{1}{2}$ " thick and cut into circles (use the floured rim of a glass). Prick with a fork and bake at 450° for 7 minutes. Turn the oven down to 350° and bake 7 to 10 minutes more. The biscuits should be hard as rock.



George Washington said a wife should have "good sense, a good disposition, a good reputation, and financial means." Martha Washington had all of these.

Well, that Declaration did it! We Americans announced that we were free, and then we had to make it real. England wasn't going to give up her colonies without a fight. In 1775 King George had proclaimed that the colonies were in rebellion. But that Declaration of Independence in 1776 changed the nature of the conflict. It said that we no longer wanted to be colonists. This wasn't a little family squabble anymore. It had become a war to found a nation. It was war for a revolutionary idea: the idea that people could rule themselves. And so it was called the American Revolution. It was a people's war—and people means men, women, and children. It wasn't only the men who would do battle.

A British officer told his general that if all the men in America were killed, "We should have enough to do to conquer the women." One British soldier wrote home to England, "Even in their dresses the females seem to bid us defiance...on their shoes [they wear] something that resembles their flag of thirteen stripes."

Margaret Corbin was 23 when her husband went to war; she went with him. When he was killed, "Molly" Corbin took his cannon and kept firing.

Another Molly, Mary Hays, also helped fill her husband's place at a cannon. But she is most remembered for dodging shells as she carried a water pitcher to thirsty soldiers. She was known as Molly Pitcher.

Deborah Sampson disguised herself as a man. She served as a soldier for three years and was wounded twice, but took care of her

own wounds to avoid being found out. Then she came down with a fever and ended up in a field hospital. That's where an amazed doctor learned the truth.

The doctor took Deborah Sampson to his house to care for her. When his niece decided she wanted to marry the handsome "soldier," the doctor decided he would have to tell Sampson's general the truth. In later years, Sampson went on a speaking tour telling of army life.

Anna Marie Lane was the only woman to receive a Revolutionary War soldier's pension from the Virginia Assembly. She enlisted in the army with her husband, but only he knew she was a woman. It wasn't that hard to keep it a secret. Soldiers rarely bathed, and they slept in their uniforms. Lane fought in four major battles until she was discovered by an army doctor after being wounded.

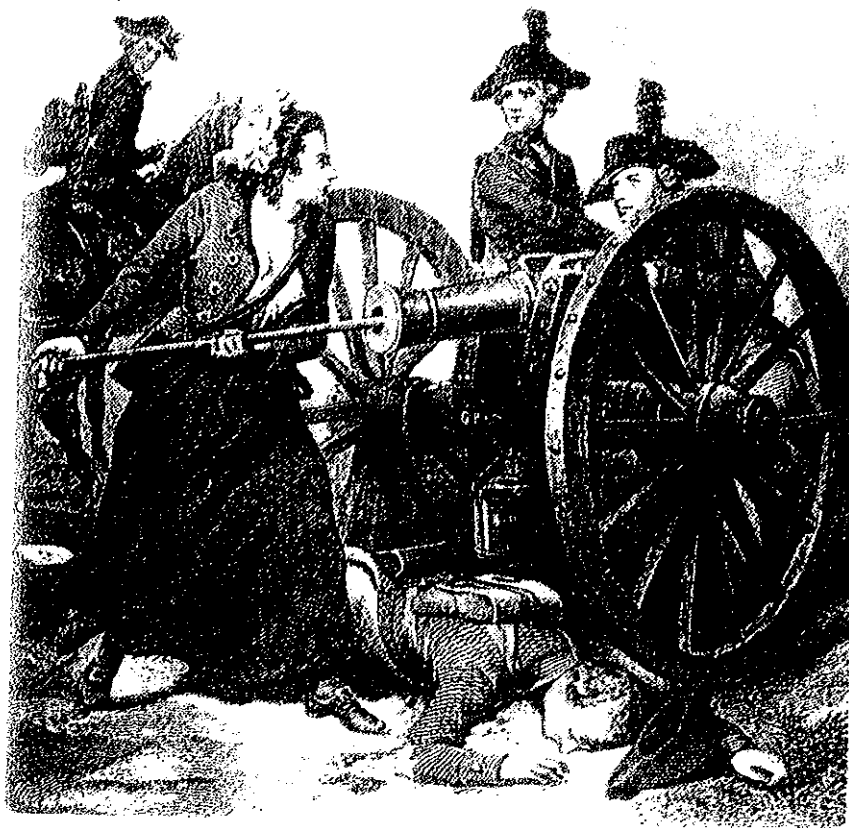
How many women fought and weren't discovered? Well, if they weren't discovered, and didn't write it down later, we'll never know.



Abigail Adams never stopped reminding her husband, John, about the inequality of opportunity for women in America compared with men. But he didn't listen.

The men say we have no business with political matters," Eliza Wilkinson wrote to a friend, "[but] I won't have it thought that because we are the weaker sex (as to bodily strength my dear) we are capable of nothing more, than minding the dairy."

Although Molly Pitcher (left, in an artist's impression) may not really have helped fire a cannon, there were women who did, such as Margaret (Molly) Corbin.





Julia Stockton, the talented daughter of one signer of the Declaration of Independence, Richard Stockton, married another signer, Benjamin Rush. Their son Richard went on to become U.S. minister in England and then secretary of the treasury under President James Monroe.

Foment means to cause something or to intensify its effect. *Iniquitous* (in-ICK-kwit-uss) means wicked or sinful. A *scheme* (SKEEM) is a plan or idea.

Most women stayed home during the war, but they did things they hadn't done before. They had to do all the men's work as well as their own. They ran farms and businesses, sewed clothes for soldiers, and helped make gunpowder and cannonballs. When battles were fought near their homes, women fed and cared for the wounded. Some women followed the army, acting as cooks and laundresses.

Children were part of it, too. An observer in Massachusetts watched "Children making Cartridges, running Bullets, making Wallets [soldiers' bags], and baking biscuit [soldiers' food]."

Women who were Loyalists had a terrible time of it. Usually they had to keep quiet or leave the country.

Molly Brant, Sir William Johnson's Mohawk widow, fought with the Iroquois on the side of Great

Britain. It was said that "one word from her goes farther with [the Iroquois] than a thousand from any white man." Johnson had died in 1774. Some people believed that he, too, would have fought for the British. It was England that tried to honor the Indian treaties. Others said that if Johnson were alive it was he, not Washington, who would have been general of the armies.

Women and children acted as spies—for both sides. They were not likely to be suspected. Some women were innkeepers and listened as they served beer to the soldiers.

Many had to face the terrors of war on their own. Smallpox moved through the country as the armies moved. Soldiers carried the germs. Thousands died: soldiers, women, and children, too.

Women whose husbands had gone off to fight were often alone when the invading army looted and destroyed, as armies often do. Eliza Wilkinson's home in South Carolina was robbed by British soldiers. In her diary she wrote of a "day of terror," and of soldiers using "the most abusive language imaginable, while making as if to hew [cut] us to pieces with their swords." On Long Island, Lydia Mintern Post was forced to quarter enemy soldiers in her house. When they drank too much she said, "we have trying and grievous scenes to go through; fighting, brawls, drumming and fifing...and every abomination going on under our very roofs."

When it was necessary, women put guns to their shoulders. Those on the frontier were used to doing it. Many had fought Indians in those terrible raids in which right and wrong were often on both sides.

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Mercy Otis Warren wrote a play about the British who were blockading Boston. She titled it *The Blockheads*. Warren used her mind and wit to turn Loyalists into Patriots. So did Phyllis Wheatley. At age seven Wheatley had wept when she stepped off a slave ship; now she was writing patriotic poems praised by George Washington.

Martha Washington had never been outside Virginia when she got into her coach and headed for Massachusetts to join her husband. People cheered her along the way. She proved that she was made of strong fiber during cold months spent in army camps.

Eliza Pinckney saw much of her wealth disappear; the war was hard on the Pinckney plantations. Instead of complaining, she said she was probably better off with "moderation in prosperity." Some American women were independent already, although John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and the other men in Philadelphia weren't ready to acknowledge it. That was a subject on which they were obtuse. (That word means "thickheaded.")

When it came to equality for women, Adams and the other delegates ignored the subject.

John Adams had no excuse at all for being obtuse on women's equality. His wife, Abigail, kept telling him that all his talk about independence and freedom was a little strange if he couldn't understand that half of the population was not free.

And women weren't really free. They were ruled by their fathers or husbands. They couldn't vote. They had no representation.

Here is the way Abigail said it in a letter to John:

Whilst you are proclaiming peace and goodwill to men...you insist upon retaining an absolute power over wives. But you must remember, that arbitrary power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken.

In another letter she wrote:

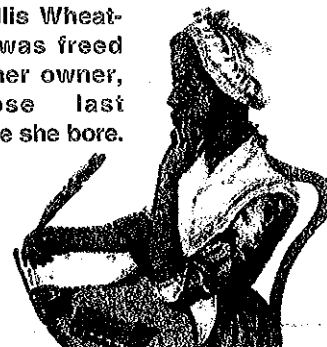
In the new code of laws...I desire you remember the ladies...if particular care and attention are not paid to the ladies we are determined to foment a rebellion and will not hold ourselves bound to obey any laws in which we have no voice or representation.

Women weren't the only ones who weren't free. Abigail knew that. In another letter to John she wrote:

It has always appeared a most iniquitous scheme to me to fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have.

She was talking about slaves and slavery.

Phyllis Wheatley was freed by her owner, whose last name she bore.



Equal Rights

In 1774, a group of slaves from Massachusetts wrote a letter to Governor Gage demanding freedom. This is part of what they said:

We have in common with all other men a natural right to our freedoms...we are a freeborn people and have never forfeited this blessing by any compact or agreement whatever. But we were unjustly dragged by the cruel hand of power from our dearest friends and some of us stolen from... our tender parents and from a populous, pleasant and plentiful country and brought hither to be made slaves for life.

Massachusetts slaves went to court and won their freedom through a series of court decisions. In most other northern states, laws were passed ending slavery. Those laws were not always enforced.