

Deborah Sampson

1760–1827



WHY SHE MADE HISTORY Deborah Sampson was the first known woman to dress as a man and serve as a combat soldier in the American Revolution.



As you read the biography below, think about why Deborah Sampson may have wanted to serve as a soldier in the Revolutionary War. Do you think other soldiers knew she was a woman dressed up as a man?



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Even before the American Revolution, many American colonists had mixed feelings toward Britain. Some remained loyal to their mother country. Others supported rebellion no matter what the cost. When the colonies finally declared their independence, Deborah Sampson joined the Continental Army to fight for the newborn country.

Deborah Sampson was born in 1760 in Plympton, Massachusetts. Her family was related to one of the first Pilgrim settlers. Her father was lost at sea when she was five. Because her mother was sick and the family lived in poverty, Sampson was sent to live with a female relative.

After several years Sampson became an indentured servant for a family in Middleborough, Massachusetts. There she learned how to read and write, and mastered many other skills. When her service was completed in 1779, she became a teacher.

In 1782 Sampson dressed in men's clothes and enlisted in the Massachusetts militia using the name Timothy Thayer. She was soon caught, discharged, and forced to pay a fine. Her capture did not discourage her. She enlisted in the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment using the name Robert Shurtleff, and marched with the troops toward West Point, New York.

Sampson served as a soldier for a year and a half. During that time, she fought in many battles. In a battle near Tarrytown, New York, she was wounded in the thigh. She didn't want anyone to find out that she was a woman, so she removed a musket ball from her leg by herself. She then continued to serve in the Continental Army.

While serving in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1783, Sampson came down with a severe fever. Dr. Barnabas Binney discovered that she was a woman while treating her. He kept her secret and arranged with Gen. Henry Knox for a discreet discharge from further military service.

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

European Colonies in America

Biography

In 1784 Sampson married Benjamin Gannett, a farmer. They had three children. She lectured in New England and New York on her experience as a woman in the military, and published her wartime stories.

Sampson petitioned the state of Massachusetts and Congress for a pension based on her service. Her friend Paul Revere, the famous rider who warned the troops that the British were coming, wrote letters on her behalf. Both the state and federal governments gave her the pension she had earned. When she died, her husband wrote to Congress asking for additional help because he was a widower. He died before he received an answer, but the money eventually went to her three children.

Sampson is considered an American Joan of Arc, the peasant-turned-heroine who led the French to victory during the Hundred Years' War. Sampson believed in the American cause and served with pride. She is remembered as an American war hero.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Compare** How was Deborah Sampson's first discharge from the military different from her second?

2. **Draw Conclusions** Why did Sampson dress up like a man to serve in the army?

ACTIVITY

What would life in the militia have been like for Deborah Sampson? Read more about military life during the Revolutionary War. Then write a brief account of a day in the militia that might have appeared in Deborah Sampson's journal.