WOMEN’S ROLES IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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**Introduction**

Women are often forgotten in the study of the American Revolution. During this period, women were viewed as inferior to men. Women were responsible for keeping the household and taking care of the family. They held very few rights and had no power politically. The men ruled the families and the colonies. The tension leading up to and the events of the American Revolution changed women’s roles in the colonies. While some women were never directly affected by the war, many others were in different ways. Joan R. Gundersen writes, “For some young women, the war had little effect on their daily routines except to provide opportunities to meet interesting young men in uniform.”[[1]](#footnote-1) For other women, the war changed their lives forever. Ben Marsh writes, “Both the practice and theory of the Revolution placed these women in unfamiliar positions within the family, the colony, and ultimately the nation.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The American Revolution threw women into different positions. This paper argues that women played important roles in the American Revolution as they served as camp followers, soldiers and fighters, as well as the head of households and families.

**Camp Followers**

“During the war women, like most men, were civilians,” writes Linda Kerber.[[3]](#footnote-3) Not all women played extensive roles in the American Revolution, but some brave women took the initiative to do anything they could to help their fathers, husbands, and sons fight for independence. One role women playing in the American Revolution was what “American civilians called camp followers.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Women, some wives of soldiers, others refugees, followed the armies. Both American troops and British troops had camp followers. These women traveled from camp to camp providing medical care, meals, laundry services, and other support for the troops. The women, with their husbands absent fighting in the war, had to bring and care for their children as they traveled with the troops.

Frederika Charlotte Riesdel is one example of a wife who had to care for her children as well as tend to the troops. She was a well-known loyalist who followed her husband while caring for their family of three small children. The children were all under the age of four. Frederika Charlotte Riesdel was the wife of Major-General Fredrich Riesdel who was commander of the German troops. She believed, “It is the duty of a wife to forsake all and follow her husband.”[[5]](#footnote-5) This was the belief of many women in this period. Loyalty to their husband was above all else. She left a home and easy way of life to follow her husband and assist him in anything he and his troops needed, all while caring for very young children.

Thousands of women did the same thing as Frederka Charlotte Riesdel. She followed her husband because she felt it was her duty as a wife. Other women; however, had to follow their husbands, fathers, and sons due to necessity. Linda Kerber writes, “Wives and children who had no means of support when their husbands and fathers were pressed into service followed after and cared for their own men, earning their subsistence by cooking and washing for troops.”[[6]](#footnote-6) These women had to follow the troops to make any money they could to sustain their family. During this time, the men were the family bread winners. Without the men at home to earn money, they had to follow their husbands and fathers. The pay was often poor, but many families were stuck following troops around and taking any jobs available. “Wives were employed as cooks; however, cooking was not regarded as a skilled trade, and the women were paid substantially less than their husbands,” writes Linda Kerber.[[7]](#footnote-7) Although the women were paid very little, they had their families together and could combine the money of their husbands and their own pay. It was not ideal, but in a time of war, it was the only way for some families to survive.

Along with cooks, nurses were a major occupation of the camp followers. Nursing was the “most common official position that the American forces offered women.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Most of the surgeons who performed skilled tasks were male, but women held the majority of the nurse positions. Nurses had gruesome jobs. Nurses had to deal with “deadly diseases, as well as lice and other debilitation infestations.”[[9]](#footnote-9) They saw blood and gore of soldiers as well as being exposed to any illness or disease. Nurses risked their lives every day, but they generally received higher wages than other jobs performed by camp followers. Hospitals offered the highest wages, so many women searched for nursing positions there.

Women had to be prepared for any wound or causality during the war. Mary Slocomb gave an account of providing medical care to soldiers during the war. Medical care was often performed with limited resources. Mary Slocomb writes about helping a solider with a gunshot wound, “I looked about and could see nothing as if it would do for dressing wounds but heart-leaves, so I gathered a handful and bound them tight to the holes, and the bleeding stopped.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Women had to be resourceful and use whatever was available to best help the soldiers. It was a very difficult and tiring task.

Women tended to numerous, important tasks that would otherwise be placed on the plates of soldiers. When women took over the tasks, it frees up soldiers to do their assigned duty of fighting. Women performed the basic duties, while soldiers fought. Generals were still not enthused by women following the troops due to their slow pace as they carry supplies and children. Generals called the women “necessary nuisances.”[[11]](#footnote-11) As much as the generals disliked the camp followers, “there was a begrudging recognition on the part of everyone that these women had a place in the British and American army camps and forts and even in the heat of battle: as cooks, washerwoman, seamstresses, nurses, scavengers for supplies, sexual partners, and occasionally as soldiers and spies.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Plagued with all the duties, camp followers played a huge role in the American Revolution. They kept camps running smoothly and aided in keeping soldiers ready to fight at all times.

To show the struggle of the camp followers, an image of the women cooking, doing laundry, as well as taking care of children is good proof of the daily lives of the women.[[13]](#footnote-13) One woman is carrying buckets, while others are caring for children. There is a young boy in the image, which is an accurate depiction of the camp followers. They were not just women, but young and old children alike. The camp followers had long hours and traveled many miles carrying supplies and carrying children. A map denoting the southern campaign of the American Revolution shows the many battle sites that troops and camp followers had to go to.[[14]](#footnote-14) These routes alone go through four colonies. This was just the southern campaign. The war went through the entire nation, making for many miles traveled.[[15]](#footnote-15) The camp followers followed the troops every mile and faced the same atrocities as the soldiers did.

**Soldiers and Fighters**

Women were not only camp followers during the American Revolution. They played many other roles, one of them as actual soldiers and fighters in the war. Going from camp followers performing household tasks like laundry and cooking to fighting in the war shows the “diversity of women’s experiences”[[16]](#footnote-16) during the American Revolution. Women helped along all sides of the fight for independence. Although women becoming soldiers and fighting was very uncommon, some women dressed like men and fought on the front lines. Other women had to fight alongside their husbands, fathers, and sons to protect their property. Not only did the colonists need to be fearful of the British troops, they also had to watch out for the Native Americans.

The roles of these women in the western portion of the colonies and more unsettled areas were vastly different as they were “influenced by the violence and hardship.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Women, while their husbands, fathers, and sons were away fighting the British, had to protect their property from Native American and British raids, putting themselves in great danger. “During the war men were frequently away from home, whether in the army or in exile, and in these circumstances women ran farms and endeavored to protect their families and property from the ravages of war,” states Elizabeth J. Clapp.[[18]](#footnote-18) Given the responsibility to protect their property and keep their family alive and well, women had to show courage and strength to fight against invaders.

Violence and aggression towards invaders was against the expectations of women during this time period. Women were seen as fragile, sophisticated people. This may have held true in the coastal and middle colonies, but “on the frontier fortitude and even violence were essential in the face of the ‘savage’ Indians.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Fighting was a way of life for the women on the frontier. Women in this area of the colonies spent much of their time alone on the homestead. “During the day when the men were working in the fields or away on hunting expeditions, they were frequently not within hailing distance.” [[20]](#footnote-20) Not much was different then when men went to war. Women were used to protecting their property without their husbands. They had to fight the Native Americans and the British during the American Revolution. In order to do so, women had to be familiar with guns and other weapons. There is evidence that women would take up arms alongside their husbands if needed. It went against the normal view of women during this time, but protection was needed and women had to take that responsibility.

Even less common than women fighting alongside their fathers and husbands to protect their private party, was women fighting alongside men for independence. Women were not allowed to fight in the war, so to do so involved dressing and acting like a man at all times. Molly Pitcher was an example of a woman brave enough to fight on the front lines. The image shows Molly Pitcher alongside men in her normal clothing working with a cannon. This was not allowed, but the image shows her bravery and drive to fight and win the war.[[21]](#footnote-21) Most women who wanted to fight dressed as men. Anna Maria Lane and Margaret Corbin were two women who fought in the warm. Anna Maria Lane, when her husband enlisted in the Continental Army, “donned men’s clothing and enlisted with him.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Margaret Corbin was granted a pension from the government after she was wounded and captured by the British troops. It will never be known exactly how many women fought as soldiers because many of “whom no records exists, or those whose secret was never discovered” were never identified.[[23]](#footnote-23) All that is known is that women fought on the frontlines of the American Revolution, even though it was illegal at the time. They were willing to risk their lives for independence.

**Household Duties**

While thousands of women were camp followers and more women disguised themselves as soldiers during the American Revolution, the highest majority of women held the responsibility of keeping up the households, farms, businesses, and families in the absence of fathers, husbands, and sons. “Most women stayed at home struggling with inflated food prices, the difficulties of running households and small farms alone, as well as the more serious problems of epidemics of dysentery and influenza.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Women often had to “confront to these wartime problems alone for the fathers, husbands, and sons were in military service.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Women had the responsibility to keep everything at home running smoothly, while the men were away for sometimes long periods of time.

Abigail Adams may be the most widely documented woman to spend a large amount of time keeping up the household while her husband, John Adams was away. Abigail Adams and John Adams corresponded by letters throughout the American Revolution. The letters speak of how difficult it was for the couple to be apart and more of how difficult it was for Abigail to take care of the house, the children, and all of the disease and violence around her.[[26]](#footnote-26) Abigail, like most other women had a very difficult role during the American Revolution. Lucy Knox was another woman who was left alone to keep up the household without her husband Henry Knox. Women during this time felt alone, stressed, and unsafe. Lucy Knox describes her feelings in a letter to her husband Henry Knox as “entirely alone.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Husbands were gone for extended periods of time. Abigail Adams mentions often in her letters how much she felt alone as well.

Women were given more responsibility than they were used to during the American Revolution. Prior to the American Revolution, women tended to domestic duties only. The war brought new responsibilities to women. “Throughout the war women struggled to maintain business and plant crops while hoping for their absent husbands’ return.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Women at this time had some experience with fieldwork. They would help their husbands in some aspects of it, but were not active in all parts. “Wives who had never negotiated the sale of crops, purchased farm equipment or supplies, paid laborers or bought and sold slaves, were now called upon to quickly develop these skills.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Women were thrown into different positions and had to quickly learn the trade in order to feed their families. Not only did women have to take up the responsibilities of running the farms, they also had to worry about the violence around them. Abigail Adams writes, “We knew not then whether we could plant or sow with safety, whether when we had toild we could reap the fruits of our industry.”[[30]](#footnote-30) The war violence could destroy any progress they had made at any time. Sometimes they were unsafe in their own homes. American and British troops “could destroy in a moment what women of all social classes had labored to preserve.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Troops would come into households and demand food or provisions. Margaret Morris gives an account in December of 1776 that “about 10 o’clock in the morning of this day, a party of about 600 [militia] men marched down the main street.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Having large numbers of troops march through main street at any time would be terrifying for the women who were home alone. This was possible at any time during the war in any town. Any progress or success that women made in the households or farms could be taken away instantly by the traveling troops. This added terror along with an overwhelming workload to women’s lives during the American Revolution. The stress was very high for women who stayed back to run the household.

Even with the uncertainty at this time, women began to excel in their new roles as the head of the farm. They began to take pride in their work. Wives started to take ownership of the farms. In letters sent between a husband a wife, “your farm slowly became our farm and eventually it became my farm.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Women took pride in their new occupations and felt more responsibility for the family than previous. They had a difficult task of taking over the farming duties, but many women succeeded. During this time women had to call upon “kinship networks, communication lines, and mobility” to successfully keep their families and households running.[[34]](#footnote-34) Communication was very difficult between the soldiers and their families, so women and families came together to help others during this desperate time.

Some women had the large responsibility of keeping the businesses and farms running, while their husbands, fathers, or sons were away at war. Other women, primarily city women just had to keep their families and households. This was a battle in itself. Women still had to attend to every matter in their lives without their husbands, fathers, or sons. They could not easily reach the men to ask them questions, so women were making decisions about their children and other affairs by themselves. The deliverance of letters was sometimes weeks or months.

Disease ran rampant through the colonies at this time. Women had to deal with sick and dying family members as well as themselves. Abagail Adams writes to John Adams about the disease in their household. She writes, “Tis with a sad Heart I take my pen to write to you because I must be the bearer of what will greatly afflict and distress you, yet I wish you to be prepaired for the Event. Your Brother Elihu lies very dangerously Sick with a Dysentery.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Disease destroyed towns as much as the British did. John Adams writes that, “dysentery can kill surely as a cannon.”[[36]](#footnote-36) War and disease were attacking the country and women were stuck on both sides of the evil. Not only did women have to attempt to heal the ill, they had to share the bad news with their husbands, fathers, and sons. Disease added more stress upon the women who had to keep up their families and households.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, women played multiple roles in the American Revolution. Women followed troops around cooking, doing laundry, and nursing soldiers back to health. Some women did this out of necessity for money, while others felt it was their duty to follow their husbands. Women also became soldiers by dressing as men. They fought on the frontline with men, fighting for independence. Other women, particularly in the western colonies had to be willing to fight to protect their property at all times from British and Native Americans. The war did not dramatically change every women’s life in that way though. Most women stayed home, but they had to take on the responsibilities of their absent husbands. They were forced to handle all the farms or businesses as well as keep their families fed and healthy. This was a challenge as disease swept through the colonies and prices were inflated. Any progress women made could be easily destroyed by troops at any minute. Women played important roles in the American Revolution. They were the backbone that kept the country running while the men were away fighting. The war may have been different if women did not step up to support the troops and colonies.

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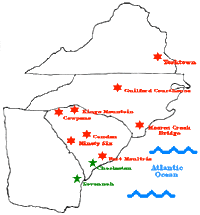
**Image 1**



**Image 2**



**Map 1**



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