



During the winter of 1804, Paul Revere, prosperous owner of the Revere Copper Works in Canton, Massachusetts, made the six-mile journey south to interview a veteran who had recently applied to Congress for a pension. The letter Revere subsequently wrote in support of the application explained that the veteran was "really poor" and suffered from ill health, the result of wounds incurred in combat. Revere wrote further:

We commonly form our Idea of the person whom we hear spoken off [sic], whom we have never seen; according as their actions are described. When I heard her spoken off as a Soldier, I formed the Idea of a tall, Masculine female . . . without education, & one of the meanest of her Sex. When I saw & discoursed with [sic] I was agreeably surprised to find [an] effeminate and converseable Woman, whose education entitled her to a better situation in life.

I have no doubt your humanity will prompt you to do all in Your power to get her some relief. I think her case much more deserving than hundreds to whom Congress have been generous.

It took Congress a year to act, but in 1805 that august body finally granted Deborah Sampson Gannett, the first woman to serve as a regular, uniformed soldier in the nation's armed services, an annual pension of \$48.

Deborah Sampson, whose life story is full of curious twists and turns, was born in Plympton, Massachusetts, in

NEVER BEFORE A CASE LIKE THIS

by Jon Swan

Robert Shurtleiff was a good soldier who served honorably in the 4th Massachusetts Regiment during the American Revolution. So, of course, did many of Robert's comrades. What truly set Shurtleiff apart was the young private's real name: Deborah Sampson.

1760, of "good stock." Her ancestors included Governor William Bradford, John Alden, and Miles Standish. Her father, however, was a wastrel who abandoned his wife and seven small children, leaving his wife so destitute that she was obliged to send her five-year-old daughter off to live with an elderly relative. This arrangement ended with the death of the relative three years later.

Another place was found for the child. Then, at the age of ten, Deborah was bound out to one Benjamin Thomas of Middleborough for a term that would expire when she turned eighteen. As an indentured servant, Deborah, who had already learned how to read and write, now learned how to make candles and soap, to spin and weave, and to work in the field with the Thomases' ten sons. During those years, she shot up to a height of five feet

seven inches—tall even for a man in those days.

In May 1779, having served out her term of indenture, she found a job as a teacher, during the six-month "warm season," at a schoolhouse a couple of miles from the Thomas farm.

Meanwhile, more dramatic events had taken place less than forty miles from Middleborough. On the night of April 18, 1775, Paul Revere had galloped off on his famous midnight ride to spread the news that the British were planning a surprise raid on colonial military stores at Concord and Lexington. The next day's fighting, in which the British were routed and forced to withdraw to Boston, marked



the beginning of the American Revolution.

The war had been going on for seven years when, in 1782, Deborah did a curious thing. At the time, she was staying in the house of Capt. Benjamin Leonard in Middleborough. Apparently just for the fun of it, one afternoon she dressed up in the clothes of one of the captain's sons, strode into a nearby recruiting office, signed up, received the bounty, and then, as a relative of Capt. Leonard later recalled, stepped into a tavern, ordered a few drinks, got a little drunk, made a scene, and slipped back into the captain's house, where she shared a bed with a black servant named Jennie.

John Adams Vinton, who in 1866 fact-checked, annotated, and wrote the introduction for a reprint of Deborah's memoirs, originally published in 1797, observes in one of many notes:

She enlisted at this time, it is supposed, partly to have a little frolic, and to see how it would seem to put on a man's clothing, but chiefly for the purpose of procuring a more ample supply of spending money.

Later, when her little frolic was exposed, she was forced to give back the money she had not yet spent.

Meanwhile, the young woman's quest for adventure had merely been whetted. After having spent weeks making herself a suit of man's clothing, on a night in May 1782, she donned her disguise, stole out of the Leonard house at midnight, and set out on foot to enlist far enough away



A print, above, commemorates

Deborah Sampson Gannett. A poor

girl, she may have enlisted in part for

the money, then managed to

keep her sex a secret even when

treated for serious wounds.

from home so that no one would be likely to recognize her.

She took a roundabout route. First, she walked down to New Bedford—a distance of about twenty-five miles—where she signed up for service aboard a privateer that lay at anchor there. Then, hearing that the captain, though pleasant on land, was a tyrant at sea, she turned around and walked up to Wrentham—some thirty-five miles to the northwest. There she spent two nights at a tavern whose proprietor was to play an important role in her postwar life, after which she set off for Boston, some thirty miles to the north. By the time she reached Boston, she had covered some ninety miles. Presumably, she could have enlisted in the state capital, instead of which she set off for Bellingham, some forty miles southwest of Boston and only a handful of miles from Wrentham.

Why had she chosen such a seemingly quirky route? Sources suggest two possible reasons. One is that she simply wanted to see more of the world than she could as a single woman, and along the way, perhaps, practice and perfect a manly gait and bearing; the other is that she had heard she might receive a higher enlistment bounty in the Bellingham area than elsewhere.

In any event, when she arrived in Bellingham, a so-called speculator helped her sign up—as Robert Shurtleiff, the given names of one of Deborah's brothers—for three years' service. He arranged for the smooth-faced, twenty-two-year-old volunteer to receive a bounty of sixty pounds, from

which he took a hefty cut. The receipt is dated May 23, 1782.

Issued a uniform, a firearm, and other regulation equipment, Robert Shurtlieff (also spelled Shurtleff, Shurtliff, Shirliff, and Shirlief) and some fifty other recruits were mustered into service in Worcester, from where they marched to West Point, New York. There, Robert was assigned to the 4th Massachusetts Regiment.

In June, a detachment of troops—Robert among them—was sent out on a scouting mission. They crossed the Hudson River at Stony Point, then moved south through the neutral ground between the American and British armies, until finally they penetrated the British line at Harlem, at the north end of Manhattan Island. After noting the enemy's positions, they headed back north.

It was in the frequently contested no-man's-land north of White Plains, between Sing Sing and Tarrytown, that the Americans were surprised by a regiment of Tory dragoons. "The ground was then warmly disputed," according to Deborah's *Memoirs*. Both sides received reinforcements, but the American firepower proved more effective, so that finally, as editor Vinton writes in a lengthy corrective footnote, "the enemy . . . were . . . compelled to a hasty and disorderly retreat, after sustaining a heavy loss."

Robert Shurtlieff was seriously wounded in this engagement—slashed in the head by a sabre and shot in the thigh.

In her *Memoirs*, which were largely ghost-written by Herbert Mann, the entrepreneurial innkeeper whose exaggerations and blatant errors of fact Vinton patiently seeks to set straight, Deborah recalls:

My head having been bound up . . . I was asked by the too inquisitive French surgeon whether I had any other wound. He had observed my extreme paleness, and that I limped in attempting to walk. I readily replied in the negative: it was a plump falsehood! "Sit you down, my lad: your boot say you tell fib!" said the surgeon, noticing that the blood still oozed from it. He took off my

boots and stockings with his own hands with great tenderness, and washed my leg to the knee. I then told him I would retire, change my clothing, and if any other wound should appear, I would inform him.

She then checked her thigh, found that "the ball had penetrated . . . about two inches," and, at the third attempt, "extracted the ball, which, as a sacred relic, I still possess." In a footnote, however, the diligent Vinton reports that, in a congressional report dated January 31, 1837, "it is stated that the ball was never extracted, and 'that the effect of the wound continued through life, and probably hastened her death.'"

Meanwhile, the central fact—that Deborah Sampson was seriously wounded in combat—is beyond doubt. A tough campaigner, she rejoined the army on the lines before the wound in her thigh was properly healed.

In November she joined her company in the long march north to Fort Ticonderoga, where she took part in a campaign against Indians who, with British encouragement, were attacking white settlements throughout the region.

The following year, 1783, was the last year of the war—and one during which the protests staged by veterans clamoring for back pay threatened the new republic. In June, several bands of veterans—at first only eighty or so, their numbers swelling to perhaps as many as 500—converged on the capital, Philadelphia, to insist, at bayonet point, on being paid.

General Washington, then headquartered in Newburgh, New York, on the west bank of the Hudson, was urged to send troops to put down the rebellion—which had completely evaporated by the time the troops arrived. (The frightened lawmakers, for their part, had retreated to Princeton, New Jersey.)

Among the force of 1,500 men dispatched to put down what looked like a mutiny was the smooth-faced young soldier who walked with a limp—and it was in Philadelphia that the secret of the soldier's sex was discovered.

Like several other soldiers sent down to the capital, Deborah came down with a raging fever that nearly caused her death. The so-called manuscript memoir—the unpublished revision by Herbert Mann, Jr., of his father's overblown original, a copy of which Vinton was able to consult—conjures up a hair-raising scene in which Deborah wakes up to hear preparations being made for her burial, with the "funeral undertakers quarreling about some part of my clothing, which each of them wished to possess." At this point, a male nurse named Jones detects signs of life and notifies the nurse matron, who is "inclined to doubt" Jones's opinion.

The hospital surgeon, Dr. Barnabas Binney, of Boston, then enters the ward. Jones urges him to take a look at Shurtlieff. The doctor steps over to the bunk, calls Shurtlieff's name, gets no answer, and walks away. Terrified that she may yet be buried alive, Deborah makes "a kind of gurgling in my throat" to attract the doctor's attention. He rushes back to the bunk, and "thrusting his hand into my bosom to ascertain if there were motion at the heart" is astonished to find "an inner vest tightly compressing my breasts, the instant removal of which not only ascertained the fact of life, but disclosed the fact that I was a woman!"

Dr. Binney kept Deborah's secret, sharing it only with the nurse matron, who took charge of looking after her. Later, Binney gave her a letter to be delivered to her commanding officer when the time came for her to be mustered out.

One more adventure lay ahead. In mid-October, on her way north to West Point, Deborah booked passage on a packet sailing from South Amboy, New Jersey, to New York City. The ship, running into a full gale, foundered and sank. As a result, Deborah lost all of her possessions, including a diary she had kept during her term of service. ("Our readers will agree," says the preface of the 1916 reprint of Vinton's 1866 reprint of the 1797 original, "that it is most unfortunate that her own manuscript journal of her experiences

was lost, and that Mr. Mann's verbose, grandiloquent, and prosy production has to do duty in its place.")

She did, however, manage to hold on to the doctor's letter, commending the bearer's bravery and revealing that Robert Shurtleiff was, in fact, a woman. On October 25, she received an honorable discharge at West Point—but, like hundreds of other veterans, no pay.

On April 7, 1784, or perhaps 1785—contemporary documents give different dates—Deborah Sampson married Benjamin Gannett, Jr., a farmer of Sharon, Massachusetts, who was reportedly "entirely devoted to her" and by whom she had a son and two daughters. The couple also took in an orphaned girl. In 1792, finding it hard to make ends meet, she petitioned the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for back pay.

Your Memorialist has made some Application to receive pay for her services in the Army, but being a Female, & not knowing the proper steps to be taken to get pay for her services, has hitherto not receiv'd one farthing for her services: whether it has been occasion'd by the fault of Officers in making up the Rolls, or whether Effrican Hamlin[,] paymaster to the 4th regiment, has carried off the papers, &c. your Memorialist cannot say: but your Memorialist prays this Honourable Court to consider the Justness of her Claim, & Grant her pay as a good soldier. . . .

Her petition was duly approved, and a resolution drawn up, one section of which read:

And whereas it further appears that 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 & chastity of her sex unsuspected and unblemished, & was discharged from the service with a fair & honorable character. Therefore. . . .

Therefore, the resolution concluded, the treasurer of the commonwealth should pay Deborah the sum of thirty-four pounds (roughly \$100). The docu-

ment was signed, with a vigorous flourish, by John Hancock, governor.

Ten years later, Deborah resorted to a new means of trying to raise cash—by appearing in a one-woman stage show, in which she delivered "An Address" (the purple prose was ghosted by her energetic promoter, Herbert Mann), following which, dressed in Continental army uniform, she expertly performed the manual of arms. Deborah made her debut at the Federal-Street Theatre in Boston, on March 20, 1802, where the show concluded "with the Song and Chorus of 'God Save the Sixteen States.'" She subsequently took the show on the road to several cities in her home state, then on to Rhode Island and New York State. Along the way, she was invited to stay in the homes of two of her former commanding officers, Capt. George Webb and Gen. John Paterson.

This last, prolonged visit—Deborah spent a month with the Patersons in Lisle, New York—was to prove beneficial. As Pauline Moody writes in her profile of Deborah in *A History of Sharon, Massachusetts*:

For the next two years Judge Paterson was in the U.S. House of Representatives. It is thought that he, with the assistance of Massachusetts congressman William Eustis, to whom Paul Revere wrote on Mrs. Gannett's behalf, was largely responsible for having the female soldier placed on the federal role of invalid pensioners.

Being placed on this list meant a slight increase in her monthly pension—from \$4 to \$6.40. Later, she relinquished this pension so as to be eligible to receive the slightly larger monthly payment—\$8—available to needy veterans who had served continuously for nine months or more. Curiously and inexplicably, while in early petitions she correctly gives April 1782 as the date of her enlistment, in later petitions she sets the date a year earlier—which accords with the date given by her tale-spinning ghostwriter.

Deborah and her husband—"a good sort of man, though of small force in business," in the words of Paul Re-

vere—seem always to have been hard up. One touching piece of evidence is a letter Deborah wrote to Revere in 1806, two years after their first meeting. After explaining that she and her son were ill, she asks for help, "though I blush at the thought that after receiving ninety & nine good turns as it were—my circumstances require that I should ask the Hundredth—the favour that I aske is the loan of 10 dollars for a short time."

In her profile of Deborah Sampson Gannett, Moody speculates that Revere "may have brought Mrs. Gannett her money from the Boston office of the agent for paying pensions" and adds: "Gossip, relayed from generation to generation, has it that the two met occasionally for a cup of cheer at Cobb's Tavern [in Sharon]."

Deborah died on April 29, 1827, at the age of sixty-six. Her ailing husband subsequently petitioned the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to allow him to receive her pension. Among the documents he submitted were doctors' bills, "for attendance on the said Deborah," amounting to more than \$600. Benjamin's petition was forwarded to the Committee on Revolutionary Pensions of the U.S. Congress, which, noting that the petitioner "has sustained [Deborah] through a long life of sickness and suffering . . . occasioned by the wounds she received and the hardships she endured in defence of the country," went on to say that the committee "believe they are warranted in saying that the whole history of the American Revolution records no case like this, and 'furnishes no other similar example of female heroism, fidelity, and courage' . . . and as there cannot be a parallel case in all time to come, the Committee do not hesitate to grant relief."

The pension, duly granted, came through only after Benjamin Gannett's death, in January 1837. Compelled to deal once again with this unparalleled case, Congress enacted a special piece of legislation making it possible for the pension to be divided among the three Gannett children.

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