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Emma Ward

Western Kentucky University, emmaleigh4999@gmail.com

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LADYLIKE:
THE NECESSITY AND NEGLECT OF CAMP FOLLOWERS
IN THE CONTINENTAL ARMY

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts
with Mahurin Honors College Graduate Distinction
at Western Kentucky University

By
Emma Leigh Ward

May 2021

CE/T Committee:

Dr. Kate Brown, Chair

Dr. Jennifer Walton-Hanley

Dr. Audra Jennings

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ABSTRACT

The contributions of female camp followers to the Continental Army are often overlooked in the study of the American Revolution. The lower-class women who followed the army performed services absolutely necessary for its operation and created a vital support network for the fledgling army that could not care for its own needs. Camp followers were therefore integral to the success of the American Revolution, but they rarely receive due credit for their contributions because they acted outside the bounds of eighteenth-century feminine values.

The intent for this thesis is to pull camp followers out of the footnotes of history and to highlight their indispensable function in the Revolutionary War. It explains women's crucial role in army camps, and it argues that their efforts are disregarded because the hardships of war tarnished traditional standards of their femininity, incited contemporary criticisms, and led to a severe shortage of academic works on the subject of camp followers. Using military reports and orders, pension records, contemporary accounts, sermons, letters, newspapers, and other publications, this thesis sheds light on the extraordinary challenges and sacrifices that camp followers made to achieve independence and keep their families together during the eight long years of the American Revolution.

I dedicate this thesis to my mother, who fostered my love for history.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my parents, David and Andrea Ward, for their unwavering love and support. Without you, I would not have enjoyed the many opportunities that brought me here. Thank you especially, mom, for taking such good care of me while I focused on my work.

Thank you to Silas Newton – my best friend, the love of my life, and an avid avoidant of history – for listening to me talk about the American Revolution for the past year. Even though I’ve finished my thesis, I can’t promise I’ll ever stop.

Thank you to my grandfather, Philip Wilkins, for always calling me with questions about my research that allowed me to practice my defense before I’d even begun writing my thesis. You were more helpful than you ever knew. Thanks, as well, to my grandmother, Linda Wilkins. You didn’t do much to help me with my thesis, but I have a million other reasons to be thankful for you.

I would also like to thank Dr. Kate Brown, Dr. Jennifer Walton-Hanley, and Dr. Audra Jennings for giving their time to help me write and defend this thesis.

Finally, I’d like to thank the Mahurin Honors College at Western Kentucky University for providing me with the resources and encouragement I needed to publish my first academic work (hopefully, of many).

VITA

EDUCATION

Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY B.A. in History – Mahurin Honors College Graduate Honors CE/T: <i>Ladylike: The Necessity and Neglect of Camp Followers in the American Revolution</i>	May 2021
South Warren High School, Bowling Green, KY	May 2017

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Historic RailPark and Train Museum, Bowling Green, KY Intern	January 2021 – April 2021
Kentucky Museum, Bowling Green, KY Museum Education Intern	September 2019 – December 2019
Applied Human Sciences, WKU Student Worker	June 2017 – March 2020
Riverview at Hobson Grove, Bowling Green, KY Docent	June 2016 – December 2016
David Graves State Farm, Bowling Green, KY Office Assistant	May 2015 – August 2016

AWARDS & HONORS

The Scholar of the College, May 2021
Summa Cum Laude, WKU, May 2021
A. M. Stickles Award, April 2021
Lowell Harrison Scholarship Fund, April 2020
Mildred T. Hardcastle Scholarship Fund, April 2018
Award of Excellence Academic Scholarship, WKU, 2017-2021
Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarship, 2017-2021
President's List, WKU, 2017-2021

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INTRODUCTION

History is filled with great men. Figures like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Adams, and Paul Revere stand like giants in the annals of American history, their colossal shadows eclipsing the actions of more ordinary persons and claiming the majority of scholarly focus for themselves. Attention turned away from these legendary characters in the 1970s, when neo-progressive and women's historians researched the lives of everyday people in the Revolutionary Era rather than the over-studied Founding Fathers.¹ This shift in historical interpretations produced a more holistic understanding of America's beginnings; however, some marginal groups remain underrepresented. The women who followed the Continental Army are one such group.

These women, along with children, merchants, contractors, servants, and enslaved laborers, formed a group most commonly known as camp followers. The 1776 American

¹ Parson Weems, *The Life of George Washington: With Curious Anecdotes, Equally Honourable to Himself, and Exemplary to His Young Countrymen* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Company, 1858); Henry Wiencek, *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003); Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2004); Edward G. Lengel, *General George Washington: A Military Life* (New York: Random House, 2005); Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010); Robert Middlekauff, *Washington's Revolution: The Making of America's First Leader* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015); David O. Stewart, *George Washington: The Political Rise of America's Founding Father* (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2021). A plethora of biographies exist on George Washington alone. Parson Weems published the first Washington biography in 1800, just a year after his death. Since then, the amount of biographies written for Washington is too numerous to count. The list above accounts for only a small portion of Washington biographies written just within the turn of the twenty-first century. Historians continue to recount the life of George Washington in slightly different ways, with new books released every year or so. This is a pattern among all the Founding Fathers – even if they do not possess the full breadth of Washington's historiography – so it is fair to call them over-studied.

Articles of War defines camp followers as “all sutlers and retainers to a camp” and “all persons whatsoever serving with the armies” who were not soldiers.² These people resided in army camps for necessity, profit, or family cohesion, and they comprised a vital support network that supplied labor and merchandise to both the British and Continental armies. In return for their services, army officials provided camp followers with shelter and rations. The Continental Army could not have functioned without the assistance of camp followers; and yet, history forgets their essential contributions to American independence. This thesis focuses particularly on female camp followers who served as laundresses, nurses, sutlers, cooks, seamstresses, battlefield attendants, and more – all of whom greatly benefited the fledgling American army that lacked the infrastructure to fulfill these needs independently. It analyzes their necessity to the American Revolution, and it argues that their neglect in contemporary accounts and modern scholarship stems from their disregard for eighteenth-century values governing “ladylike” behavior.

Very little extensive scholarship exists on the topic of camp followers. Walter Hart Blumenthal published the first comprehensive study of camp women in his 1952 *Women Camp Followers of the American Revolution*, a brief and biased account that portrays women with the Continental Army in a highly negative light.³ Only three hundred copies circulated, and the subject of camp women did not reappear for several decades. In the 1980s and 1990s, once neo-progressive and women’s history rose in popularity, studies of camp followers resurfaced. John U. Rees, a scholar specializing in the everyday

² Continental Congress, *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, September 20, 1776, <https://lccn.loc.gov/05000059>.

³ Walter Hart Blumenthal, *Women Camp Followers of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: George MacManus, 1952).

experiences of the Continental Army, wrote a series of articles on the specific details of camp followers' lives, appearances, and various assignments over the course of two decades.⁴

In 1999, historian Holly A. Mayer wrote *Belonging to the Army: Camp Followers and Community during the American Revolution*, which remains the seminal work on this subject.⁵ Mayer uses male and female camp followers to argue that the Continental Army created a small-scale community reflecting the socioeconomic characteristics of the burgeoning nation, and she portrays camp followers more positively than Blumenthal's account. Rees's and Mayer's publications, researched and written at the same time, shaped one another. A handful of subsequent monographs heavily influenced by Mayer discuss camp followers, such as Carol Berkin's 2005 *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence*, Robert Dunkerly's 2007 *Women of the Revolution: Bravery and Sacrifice on the Southern Battlefields*, and Nancy K. Loane's 2009 *Following*

⁴ John Rees, "'Some in Rags and Some in Jags,' but None 'in Velvet Gowns': Insights on Clothing Worn by Female Followers of the Armies During the American War for Independence," *Association of Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums* XXVIII, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 18-21; John Rees, "'The Multitude of Women...': An Examination of the Numbers of Female Followers with the Continental Army," *The Brigade Dispatch* XXIV, no. 1 (Autumn 1992): 5-17; XXIV, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 6-16; XXIV, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 2-6; John Rees, "'The Number of Rations Issued to the Women in Camp': New Material Concerning Female Followers," *The Brigade Dispatch* XXVIII, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 2-10; XXVIII, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 2-13; John Rees, "'The Proportion of Women which Ought to Be Allowed...': An Overview of Continental Army Female Camp Followers," *Association of Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums* XXVIII, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 18-21.

⁵ Holly Mayer, *Belonging to the Army: Camp Followers and Community during the American Revolution* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1999).

the Drum: Women at the Valley Forge Encampment.⁶ However, none devote more than a few chapters to the topic.

Clearly, historiography on female camp followers is not extensive, and this thesis seeks to understand why. Chapter One explains why camp followers with the Continental Army are an important topic to study. Their presence was integral to the success of the American Revolution, as the Continental Army could not function without their labor. In addition, their great numbers and intriguing experiences make camp followers a necessary facet in understanding the full complexity of the American Revolution. Chapter Two argues that history overlooks camp followers because they broke eighteenth-century standards of femininity. Traditional gender norms expected women to be the moral leaders of their households. They ought to reflect virtue, modesty, compassion, piety, and selflessness to mold their children into good citizens. However, camp followers' social class and the rough environment of war did not allow them the privilege to behave like upstanding ladies. They drank heavily, used foul language, roughhoused, dressed in stolen rags, and generally forgoed the niceties of polite society. Because they breached social strictures, contemporary observers viewed camp followers as inferior women. Blinded by their comportment, commentators disparaged camp women and disregarded their benefits to the Revolutionary War. These negative accounts, coupled with the declining role of camp followers in subsequent American wars, stunted the development of historiography

⁶ Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence* (Ithaca, New York: Vintage Books, 2005); Robert M. Dunkerly, *Women of the Revolution: Bravery and Sacrifice on the Southern Battlefields* (Charleston, South Carolina: The History Press, 2007); Nancy K. Loane, *Following the Drum: Women at the Valley Forge Encampment* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Potomac Books, 2009).

on camp women and erased their existence from the mythologized narrative of America's beginnings.

Although the parameters of this thesis focus on the experiences of camp followers with the Continental Army, it uses sources pertaining to British and Hessian camp followers where applicable to develop its argument. All such sources are clearly labeled, and they are only applied to Continental camp followers where it is certain that they align with American experiences. In addition, the narrow topic of camp followers reflects the broader dynamics of social class and gender in early America. It shows the increased appreciation of women's domestic activities and political involvement, which resulted from Enlightenment teachings and women's importance in boycotts, and it illustrates the exclusion of lower-class women like camp followers from this changing perception. Thus, female camp followers with the Continental Army are an important but under-utilized tool for understanding eighteenth-century American women's history.

CHAPTER ONE

When picturing the Continental Army, one likely imagines a rag-tag collection of soldiers marching toward redcoats with bayonets fixed; or, perhaps, the cold, ill, starving men who weathered the harsh Valley Forge winter come to mind. Cropped from this image of Continental Army camps are the many women and children who resided there. Soldiers' wives, widows, refugees, runaways, and any other women hard-hit by war chose to follow the army to receive its protection and provisions in exchange for labor.

These women fell within the lower echelons of the socioeconomic strata. It is difficult to precisely define the class structures of eighteenth-century America because it varied greatly between urban and rural regions, and class consciousness was hazy at best. For the context and clarity of this thesis – which uses class structure as an assessment of privilege – upper, middle, and lower class affiliations are simplified to represent disparities in wealth and ease of living. Jackson Turner Main explains in *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* that between one-third and two-fifths of Americans comprised a lower class. Main characterizes them as landless laborers, indentured servants, and enslaved laborers with low incomes and little, if any, property.⁷ Camp followers, who were very poor and consistently struggled for basic necessities throughout the Revolutionary War, belonged to this class.

Women had a variety of reasons to follow the army, and the foremost of these was necessity. With their fathers and husbands absent, women lost their primary sources of

⁷ Jackson Turner Main, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 272.

income and had great difficulty caring for themselves and their families. Many women joined their relatives' regiments for the guarantee of shelter and provisions that they no longer had at home. In *Following the Drum*, Nancy K. Loane describes camp followers as "hungry" and "destitute" women who "clung to the very fringes of respectability and followed the troops because the army afforded them, and the children with them, their best chance for survival."⁸ Holly Mayer writes in *Belonging to the Army* that "most families with the military were there simply because they had no alternative means of support . . . they had no property or business to maintain them at home while the father or husband was away."⁹

Another – and far more pressing – force that pushed women to follow the army was the danger of enemy occupation. While stationed in their towns, some cruel enemy soldiers terrorized rebel sympathizers: they plundered their homes, stole their crops and livestock, and even raped women. Accounts from Princeton, New Jersey early in the war record delinquent British soldiers bringing an epidemic of rape upon Princeton women. The unknown author bemoans that "many honest virtuous women have suffered in this Manner and kept it Secret for fear of making their lives miserable" – although rape victims did nothing wrong, the loss of their virginity still tarnished their reputations and diminished their marriage prospects. In one example, British soldiers occupying Princeton, supposedly searching for hidden rebels, approached a young girl and asked her to show them her family's barn. Once there, the men strangled and raped her.¹⁰ A 1780 New Jersey

⁸ Loane, *Following the Drum*, 113-114.

⁹ Mayer, *Belonging to the Army*, 125.

¹⁰ Varnum Lansing Collins, ed., *A Brief Narrative of the Ravages of the British and Hessians at Princeton in 1776-1777: A Contemporary Account of the Battles of Trenton and Princeton* (California: University of California, 1906), 14-15.

newspaper exclaimed that the regulars' "brutality to some women in the Farms would make even Savages blush." That same year, a Continental officer recorded his experience with a victim:

A handsome young [Connecticut] country-girl in the most affecting distress and anguish of mind, who had the night before been forcibly subjected to the brutal violence of seven or eight different officers of that army. When we questioned her, she could only answer in broken accents of the most excessive grief that she was ruin'd and wished never again to be spoken to.¹¹

Another shocking display of brutality occurred in Princeton in 1777. Shortly before battle, a British captain ventured into a New Jersey farmhouse and demanded a room. The resident informed him that her tiny home had no room to spare, so the captain "Went on so Horribly with his Threats oaths and curses" that the terrified woman miscarried. The next night, after a battle waged outside and the woman lay ill in bed, a group of soldiers came back into her house, tore the clothes off her back, stole her valuable possessions, and threatened to kill her.¹² Clearly, women faced great danger in their enemy-occupied towns. With their male relatives soldiering elsewhere, women felt safer following the Continental Army than they did in their own homes.

Sometimes, soldiers did not merely harass a town's residents – both the British and Continental armies drove enemy sympathizers out of their towns entirely.¹³ Thus, some of the women who followed the armies did so because they were refugees and had nowhere else to go. In "The Problem in Revolutionary Poughkeepsie," a 1777 *Royal Gazette*

¹¹ William Scudder Stryker, ed., *Documents Relating to the Revolutionary History of the State of New Jersey, Volume 4* (New Jersey: J. L. Murphy Publishing Company, 1914), 423-424, 446.

¹² Collins, *A Brief Narrative of the Ravages of the British and Hessians at Princeton in 1776-1777*, 16-17.

¹³ Holly Mayer, *Belonging to the Army*, 11.

publication, author Jonathan Clark writes that “between 300 and 400 women and children . . . fled from persecution in different parts of this province; they were sent off by order of committees, councils of safety, &c. with little more than their wearing apparel, being robbed of their furniture, cattle, &c. and their farms given to strangers.”¹⁴ Not all of these refugees became camp followers, and not all camp followers were refugees – especially in the Continental Army. General Washington preferred to scatter patriot refugees across the countryside unless they proved useful, as the fledgling American army lacked the funds to care for them. The British Army sent loyalist refugees to its major strongholds, such as New York City, if it did not want them in camp.¹⁵ Those who proved useful, though, often remained in army camps to work. For those with the Continental Army, they served an added purpose: stoking the flames of soldiers’ patriotism with their blatant suffering and encouraging them to fight the British.

Enslaved persons seeking their freedom also followed the armies. In 1775, Virginia’s governor Lord Dunmore issued a proclamation that declared “all indentured servants, Negroes, or others (appertaining to rebels) free” if they joined the British Army and helped curtail the rebellion.¹⁶ This primarily affected male slaves eligible to serve as soldiers, but it still encouraged women to serve in British army camps.¹⁷ Because the cause for independence touted notions of liberty, equality, and freedom, some enslaved persons

¹⁴ Jonathan Clark, “The Problem in Revolutionary Poughkeepsie,” *The Royal Gazette*, December 27, 1777, p.2. col. 2, quoted in Holly Mayer, *Belonging to the Army: Camp Followers and Community during the American Revolution* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 11.

¹⁵ Mayer, *Belonging to the Army*, 12.

¹⁶ Lord Dunmore, “A Proclamation,” *The Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser*, December 6, 1775, (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC01706).

¹⁷ Robert M. Dunkerly, *Women of the Revolution*, 53.

believed they could gain their freedom by joining the rebel army instead. Although he refused to do so for several years, in 1778 George Washington created an entire regiment of over 700 African-American men.¹⁸

As in the British Army, some camp followers in the Continental Army were escaped slaves. In October 1778, Colonel Mordecai Gist published two advertisements for a runaway slave in *The Pennsylvania Packet*. He describes her as a “Mulatto woman named Rachel, a lusty tall woman, and very big with child,” accompanied by her six-year-old son.¹⁹ He writes that Rachel likely joined a soldier with the Fifth Maryland Regiment, “where she pretends to have a husband, with whom she had been the principal part of this campaign, and passed herself as a free woman.”²⁰ There are very few sources explicitly referencing black camp followers, but, without a doubt, most of their experiences in Continental Army camps aligned with those of white camp followers. Black and white camp women both resided at the bottom of the social strata, shared the same feminine responsibilities, faced the same dangers, and received harsh criticism from contemporary observers. Within the parameters of this thesis, black and white camp women were very similar.

Another reason women followed the army was to keep their families together. When their husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons joined the Continental Army, women and

¹⁸ Alexander Scammel, “Return of the Negroes in the Army, August 24, 1778,” *George Washington Papers*, Library of Congress (016.05.00).

¹⁹ Mordecai Gist, “Thirty Dollars Reward,” *The Pennsylvania Packet* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), October 15, 1778, front page, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/38331267>.

²⁰ Mordecai Gist, “Fifty Dollars Reward,” *The Pennsylvania Packet* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), October 24, 1778, front page, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/38331283>.

their children – atop the aforementioned reasons – went with them to stay with the men they loved. They did so of their own volition or at the request of their relatives. Camp follower Sarah Osborn Benjamin, for example, recorded in her pension application that she joined the army because her new husband, Aaron, asked her to follow him. While marching through Philadelphia in 1781, a group of Quaker women asked her to stay with them. “No,” her husband replied, “he could not leave her behind.”²¹

Pure patriotism may have motivated some women to follow the army so they could benefit the fight for independence. Holly Mayer posits that by relinquishing their stability, allowing their husbands and principal laborers to join the army, and dutifully following and serving in their regiments, camp followers might have thought their actions exhibited a poignant display of patriotism and self-sacrifice. However, Mayer writes, this was always a secondary motivation.²² The vast majority of women joined the army out of necessity rather than political sentiment. Patriotic as they might have been, army life presented grueling challenges. It took more pressing motivation than patriotism for women to accept these challenges and follow the army.

The numbers of camp women that followed the British and Continental armies fluctuated greatly between regiments, seasons, regions, and years of the war. Generally, more women resided in British camps, which were better provisioned than the fledgling American army camps.²³ Nancy K. Loane writes in *Following the Drum: Women at the Valley Forge Encampment* that the ratio of British soldiers to camp women was one to

²¹ Sarah Osborn Benjamin, *Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files* (NARA: #M804, W. 4558), <https://www.fold3.com/image/25753052>.

²² Mayer, *Belonging to the Army*, 125.

²³ Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, 52.

eight at the beginning of the war, and it rose to one to four by war's end. There was initially one woman to every thirty Hessian soldiers, which later increased to one for every fifteen.²⁴ Colonial women who joined these camps often became temporary "camp wives" for British and Hessian soldiers, and some of these men settled down with their camp wives after the war.

Far fewer women followed the Continental Army, both because it was less able to provide for them and because American army officials viewed them as a nuisance. General Washington wrote in 1777, "In the present marching state of the army, every incumbrance proves greatly prejudicial to the service; the multitude of women in particular, especially those who are pregnant, or have children, are a clog upon every movement – The Commander in Chief therefore earnestly recommends . . . to get rid of all such as are not absolutely necessary."²⁵ Although fewer women followed the Continental Army than the British Army, their number was still great. General Thomas Sumter wrote to General Nathanael Greene on December 19, 1781 that, "The Number and Retchedness of the Women & Children Cant be Conceived."²⁶ On August 11, 1778, a British spy reporting from New York observed that "Last Sunday the Rebel army was Mustered at the W[hite] plains, when it was reported amongst them that they have 20000, but the Friends to Government say if they be 14000 that is the outside of them. [T]hat the Women and

²⁴ Nancy K. Loane, *Following the Drum*, 133.

²⁵ George Washington, "General Orders, 4 August 1777," in *Founders Online*, accessed 18 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0508>.

²⁶ Thomas Sumter to Nathanael Greene, 19 December 1781, in *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene, Vol. X: 3 December 1781 – 6 April 1782*, ed. Dennis M. Conrad, Roger N. Parks, Martha J. King, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 52.

Waggoners make up near the half of their Army.”²⁷ This estimate, if accurate, shows nearly seven thousand camp followers with the Continental Army in New York, which places the number of camp women at a few thousand. The precise amount varied – there were more women in winter encampments when the army was sedentary than during campaigns, and more women came to camp in areas hard-hit by the war.²⁸ Loane calculates that approximately four hundred women resided at Valley Forge in the winter of 1777-1778, with a ratio of one woman to every forty-four men. By 1783, this ratio rose to one woman for every twenty-six men.²⁹ This change occurred because, as they died in battle or from disease throughout the war, the number of men in the army decreased. The number of women, however, remained mostly the same – those who were widowed often stayed with the camps.³⁰

Within the army camps, women and their children formed family units with soldiers. Amidst the hardships of war, men and women with the army clung to any shred of domesticity they could find; it reminded them of happier times before the war, and they looked forward to the return of peaceful family life when the conflict ended. The revolution, however, hindered the traditional dynamics of families. Mayer writes that, “a man was supposed to provide for and protect his family; now however, it was his duty to secure his nation. Many, if not most, military men found it difficult to do both well.”³¹ To relieve this problem and ensure that soldiers’ loyalties were undivided, the army allowed

²⁷ Entry, 11 August 1778, New York, British Intelligence Journal (Manuscript Division: Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.).

²⁸ Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, 51-52.

²⁹ Loane, *Following the Drum*, 113, 133.

³⁰ Dunkerly, *Women of the Revolution*, 133.

³¹ Mayer, *Belonging to the Army*, 123.

their wives and families to live in camps and receive protection and provisions. Thus, family life continued as best as it could in the arduous environment of army encampments.

This is best evidenced in a scene recorded by British soldier Thomas Anburey:

...in the midst of the heavy snow-storm, upon a baggage-cart, and nothing to shelter her from the inclemency of the weather but a bit of an old oil-cloth, a soldier's wife was delivered of a child, she and the infant are both well, and are now at this place. It may be said, that women who follow a camp are of such a masculine nature, they are able to bear all hardships; this woman was quite the reverse, being small, and of a very delicate constitution."³²

Although soldiers, their wives, and their children formed domestic units in camp, the camp environment scarcely resembled typical domestic life. The British and Continental armies flooded once-peaceful farmland and felled its trees, dug latrines, built crude shelters, and filled them with hundreds and thousands of soldiers and camp followers.³³ Camp women lived in extremely close quarters with other soldiers. In 1777, Captain Robert Kirkwood of the Delaware Militia ordered six people to sleep in each tent. Usually, this meant one woman slept with her husband and four other men in the same tent. Unmarried women slept together in separate tents.³⁴

The experiences of lower-class women in army camps harshly contrasted those of middle- or upper-class officers' wives. These women visited their husbands during winter encampments, and they primarily attended to their social calendars during their time with the army. They did not sleep in tents or shabby huts like camp followers; instead, their

³² Thomas Anburey, *Travels through the Interior Part of America* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1923), 24-25, retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/24000987/>.

³³ Loane, *Following the Drum*, 2-3.

³⁴ Robert Kirkwood, *The Journal and Order Book of Captain Robert Kirkwood of the Delaware Regiment of the Continental Line*, ed. Joseph Brown Turner (Wilmington: The Historical Society of Delaware, 1910), 147.

influential husbands boarded them in the best homes available in the area. This is not to say that camp living was completely serene: their journeys to camp were often arduous, they lived in cramped quarters during harsh, cold winters, and they were susceptible to camp diseases. Still, their experiences were far more pleasant than camp followers, who spent their time with the army doing hard labor and struggling for survival. Carol Berkin writes in *Revolutionary Mothers* that:

The camp followers who washed [soldiers'] dirty clothing and scavenged boots for them from the battlefield were part of the military life these men hoped would soon come to an end. But the generals' wives served to distinguish masculine roles from feminine, and by showing courtesy to them the officers and the soldiers reaffirmed that they could still remember, and function in, a world far removed from the brutality and violence of warfare.³⁵

Thus, officers' wives brought much-needed domestic routine to army men and represented the filial tranquility waiting for them after the war; camp followers, on the other hand, represented the brutality of war.

As Berkin's analysis implies, camp followers could not merely live in camp and accept army hospitality – they had to assist the army in return by performing its much-needed support services. In addition, the soldiers' low pay could not sufficiently support their families; thus, women had to work to augment their income. The jobs they performed resembled the ones they performed at home. In *Women of the Revolution*, Robert Dunkerly lists the following responsibilities of camp followers: they tended fires, cooked, cleaned, gathered supplies, did laundry, chopped wood, cared for animals, sewed, and did whatever else was needed of them.³⁶ Women completed these familiar chores in their own households, too; Carol Berkin poignantly writes that “camp followers engaged in

³⁵ Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, 91.

³⁶ Dunkerly, *Women of the Revolution*, 27, 33.



Figure 1. A Military Encampment in Hyde Park, 1785, by James Malton. Courtesy of Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

traditional female roles in an untraditional setting.”³⁷ Holly Mayer argues that this created an interesting dynamic between families and the military. By accepting aid from the army, camp women had to work for it. By giving them work, the army legitimized women’s presence in the military community.³⁸

The most frequent chore performed by female camp followers was, without a doubt, laundry. Someone had to clean soldiers’ clothes and keep the troops in some semblance of sanitation. As a culturally feminine chore, soldiers balked at the idea of cleaning their

³⁷ Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, 58.

³⁸ Mayer, *Belonging to the Army*, 8.

clothes themselves. In 1775, British soldier Benjamin Thompson commented on the American troops that:

They have no women in the camp to do washing for the men, and they in general not being used to doing things of this sort, and thinking it rather a disparagement to them, choose rather to let their linen, &c., rot upon their backs than to be at the trouble of cleaning 'em themselves. And to this nasty way of life . . . must be attributed those putrid, malignant, and infectious disorders which broke out among them . . .³⁹

To keep clean, most men paid camp women to perform this task for them. Each laundress took on washing for hundreds of soldiers. They labored for hours over wooden tubs, scrubbing shirts and breeches with lye soap and draping them over tents to dry.⁴⁰ Camp followers could not refuse this difficult task, or they risked losing their rations. In October 1778, for example, the Second Pennsylvania Regiment ordered that women could not “draw rations from the continent in this regiment unless they make use of their endeavors to keep the men clean.”⁴¹

Some men short on funds or without enough laundresses in camp had no choice but to launder their own clothes. Washington ordered in May 1778 that, “The Troops are in future to be exempt from exercise every Friday afternoon, which time is allowed them for washing Linnen and cloathing.”⁴² Other soldiers or groups of soldiers hired laundresses to exclusively wash their clothes. In 1780, Colonel Ebenezer Huntington wrote, “Money is

³⁹ The Historical Manuscripts Commission of Great Britain, *Reports on the Manuscripts of Mrs. Stopford-Sackville, of Drayton House, Northamptonshire, Volume II* (Boston: Gregg Press, 1972), 15.

⁴⁰ Dunkerly, *Women of the Revolution*, 33-35.

⁴¹ Regimental Orders, Fredricksburg, VA, 1778, *Journal of the First Continental Regiment of Foot*, no. 4 (October-November 1990): 8, in Nancy K. Loane, *Following the Drum: Women at the Valley Forge Encampment* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Potomac Books, 2009), 118.

⁴² George Washington, “General Orders, 14 May 1778,” in *Founders Online*, accessed 19 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-15-02-0114>.

good for nothing . . . [and] my Washing bill is beyond the limits of my Wages.” He determined to “hire some Woman to live in Camp to do the Washing for myself and some of the Officers,” as it was cheaper to do so than to pay for laundry by the piece.⁴³

Camp followers had massive workloads when laundering for their regiments. New York’s 2nd Regiment calculated that only two laundresses were “absolutely necessary” to do the washing for its 248 men, though more were always welcome. New York’s 3rd Regiment required four women for its 435 men.⁴⁴ Women in nearby towns were often hired to wash for the army in regiments short on laundresses. Men were required by military order to pay women for their laundry services, and the army sometimes gave them supplies.⁴⁵ However, the army also set rates to prevent women from overcharging. These were meager amounts. A June 1780 order at West Point set the following prices: “For a Shirt, two Shillings; Woolen Breeches, Vest and Overalls, two Shillings, each; Linen Vest & Breeches, one Shilling, each; Linen Overalls, one Shilling & Six Pence, each; Stockings & Handkerchief, Six Pence, each; The Women who wash for the Companies will observe these regulations.”⁴⁶ If women would not wash at these prices, they faced military discipline. 1776 regimental orders from Mt. Independence dictated that, “Any Woman belonging to the Regt, who shall refuse to wash for the Men, shall be immediately drumm’d out of the Regt, as they are not found in Victuals to distress and render the Men unfit for

⁴³ Walter Hart Blumenthal, *Women Camp Followers of the American Revolution*, 63.

⁴⁴ Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, 56.

⁴⁵ *Orderly Book of the Northern Army, at Ticonderoga and Mt. Independence, from October 17th, 1776, to January 8th, 1777: With Biographical and Explanatory Notes, and an Appendix* (Albany: J. Munsell, 1859), 128.

⁴⁶ Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, 57.

Duty, but to keep them clean and decent.”⁴⁷ In rare cases, camp followers improved their working conditions; for example, laundresses in General Anthony Wayne’s regiment went on strike to obtain better pay for their services.⁴⁸ However, camp women were more often than not subjected to the will of the army that provided for them and had to abide by the wages it set. In the absence of adequate pay, laundresses often took shortcuts in their washing duties. When officers turned their backs, women washed clothes in soldiers’ drinking water and threw soapsuds on regimental parade grounds. Although they received repeated reprimands for these actions, women continued to make their work easier.⁴⁹

Another major task assigned to camp women was nursing. Traditionally, men were nurses, but the army wanted women for this role during the American Revolution to free up men for soldiering. Most army wives performed nursing duties, though they were only paid as nurses if the army specifically hired them for that task. Nursing was the most dangerous job a camp follower could fill due to the risk of disease, but army officials forced women to perform this duty. In 1776, William Howe declared that “The Commander in Chief is Determin’d not to Allow any women to Remain with the Army That Refuses to take a Share of this Necessary Duty.”⁵⁰ Thus, women with both armies fulfilled their “necessary duty” and served in hospitals when required.

⁴⁷ *Orderly Book of the Northern Army, at Ticonderoga and Mt. Independence, from October 17th, 1776, to January 8th, 1777*, 116.

⁴⁸ Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), 213.

⁴⁹ Mayer, *Belonging to the Army*, 64-65.

⁵⁰ William Howe, “Headquarters, 15 October 1776,” *Sir William Howe Orderly Book, 27 January 1776 – 1 May 1778*, at William Clements Library, in Holly Mayer, *Belonging to the Army: Camp Followers and Community during the American Revolution* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 13.

In any part of an army camp, poor sanitation made illnesses run rampant. Hospitals, in particular, were breeding grounds for disease. Doctor Lewis Beebe remarked in 1776 that “those who are sick [were] crowded into a dirty, Lousy, stinking Hospital, enough to kill well men.”⁵¹ William Hutchinson of the Chester County militia wrote in 1777 that:

After the Battle of Germantown, the declarant had occasion to enter the apartment called the hospital, in which the wounded were dressing and where the necessary surgical operations were performing and there beheld a most horrid sight. The floor was covered with human blood; amputated arms and legs lay in different places in appalling array, the mournful memorials of an unfortunate and fatal battle, which indeed it truly was.⁵²

As horrid as it was, tending to the sick and wounded was a job that had to be done. Washington and other army officers targeted camp women for this task throughout the war, and many served as matrons and both official and unofficial nurses. Matrons supervised nurses, managed their hospitals’ housekeeping, and ensured that the wards ran smoothly and efficiently. Unlike today, female nurses very rarely administered medicine or tended wounds; their primary responsibility was caring for patients’ hygiene. Nurses bathed patients, combed their hair, washed their hands, changed their linens, emptied their chamber pots, sanitized the wards with vinegar, and delivered the personal items of dead patients to the Ward-master, among other things.⁵³

At the start of the war, matrons received four dollars per month for their services; nurses, on the other hand, received only two dollars per month and one ration per day. This

⁵¹ Lewis Beebe, *Journal of a Physician on the Expedition Against Canada, 1776*, ed. Frederick R. Kirkland (Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1935), 347.

⁵² John C. Dann, *The Revolution Remembered: Eyewitness Accounts of the War for Independence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 150-151.

⁵³ George Washington to Congress, 14 September 1776, in Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 59.

salary scarcely met their needs, as evidenced by Alice Redman's petition to increase her wages. Redman pleaded for, "an augmentation to her pay as . . . she has at this present time sixteen men for to cook and take care of . . . she is obliged to be up day and night with some of the patients and never has been allowed so much as a little Tea, or Coffee . . . She your petitioner out of that two dollars per month is obliged to buy brooms and the soap we wash with . . ." ⁵⁴ This was only ten percent of what surgeons and other male employees made. ⁵⁵ Because nurses were so essential to the army and because there were so few to be had, their salaries increased throughout the war to make the position seem more appealing. In 1776, Washington ordered that nurses' pay double from two dollars per month to four dollars per month. He wrote to John Hancock that:

...the pay now allowed to Nurses for their attendance on the sick, is by no means adequate to their services – the consequence of which is, that they are extremely difficult to procure, Indeed they are not to be got, and we are under the necessity of substituting in their place a Number of Men from the respective Regiments, whose service by that means is entirely lost in the proper line of duty, and but little benefit rendered to the Sick . . . they should be allowed a Dollar per Week, and that for less they cannot be had. ⁵⁶

By 1777, nurses' wages doubled again to eight dollars per month. ⁵⁷

Still, few women desired this job, and army officials had to persuade camp women to serve in hospitals. On several occasions, Washington ordered his officers to procure "as

⁵⁴ William Hand Browne and Louis Henry Dielman, eds., "Petition of Alice Redman – A Nurse of the Revolution," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 17, no. 1 (1922): 379.

⁵⁵ Ray Raphael, *A People's History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 139-140.

⁵⁶ George Washington to John Hancock, New York, 14 September 1776, in *Founders Online*, accessed 20 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-06-02-0247>.

⁵⁷ Loane, *Following the Drum*, 121.

many Women of the Army as can be prevailed on to serve as Nurses.”⁵⁸ He lamented to Brigadier General John Stark in 1778 that he, “cannot see why the Soldiers Wives . . . should be supported at public expence. They may get most extravagant wages for any kind of work in the Country and to feed them, when that is the case, would be robbing the public and encouraging idleness. If they would come down and attend as Nurses to the Hospitals they would find immediate employ.”⁵⁹ Although it was difficult and dangerous work, the Continental Army clearly expected camp women to serve as nurses when requested in return for the protection and provisions it gave them.

The final major employment option for camp women was suttling. A sutler, as defined by William Chetwood De Hart in *Observations on Military Law*, is “a person who, under the authority of the military commander, is permitted to reside in or follow the camp with food, liquors, and small articles of military equipment, or others, for general use or consumption.”⁶⁰ The Continental Army required civilian sutlers to sell their wares in camp because it could not yet provide for all its own supply needs. While most sutlers were men, female sutlers, most often soldiers’ wives and widows, also sold their merchandise in army camps to augment their incomes. Suttling differed from camp women’s other major positions as laundresses and nurses because, although still subjected to military orders, the army did not obligate camp women to become sutlers.

⁵⁸ George Washington, “General Orders, 31 May 1778,” in *Founders Online*, accessed 20 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-15-02-0289>.

⁵⁹ George Washington to Brigadier General John Stark, White Plains, 5 August 1778, in *Founders Online*, accessed 20 February 2021, <https://founders.archive.gov/documents/Washington/03-16-02-0267>.

⁶⁰ William Chetwood De Hart, *Observations on Military Law, and the Constitution and Practice of Courts Martial with a Summary of the Law of Evidence, as Applicable to Military Trials* (New York: W. S. Hein, 1859), 24-25.

Women completed other jobs for the army, though none to the extent of laundering, nursing, and suttling. For example, women cooked for soldiers when needed. However, this was a task many men carried out for themselves – especially on the march. Camp women assisted from time to time, but cooking was not a primary or regulated responsibility. As an extension of their positions as laundresses, camp women also mended minor wear-and-tear on clothes. Yet again, this was not one of their primary jobs. The army outsourced most major sewing needs to tailors, which was a traditionally male profession. Other minor chores performed by camp women include cleaning, tending to livestock, chopping wood, tending fires, collecting supplies, and guarding baggage.

Atop their labors to support the army, camp followers also faced the same dangers as soldiers. The most prevalent of these was a lack of food. Despite the limited availability of provisions, the Continental Army had to make an effort to provide for soldiers' families so it could keep enough men in the ranks. If a soldier's family was in distress, he would likely abandon army service to assist his wife and children. In December 1775, for example, Private Ralph Morgan requested an eight-day furlough because he "hath a Wife and two Children destitute of an House to cover them, & his Household Furniture in the Streets." Moved by their situation, Washington granted Morgan a discharge to care for his family.⁶¹ However, the Continental Army struggled to keep a strong fighting force, and officers grew less and less likely to grant furloughs for want of men in the ranks. Washington promised furloughs as an incentive for new enlistments, and in late 1775 he ordered that no other furloughs "can be indulged under any pretence whatsoever" without

⁶¹ James Mitchell Varnum to George Washington, Prospect Hill, 5 December 1775, in *Founders Online*, accessed 20 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-02-02-0449>.

the carefully-considered permission of commanding officers.⁶² The Continental Army faced a quandary by restricting furloughs, as soldiers often presented good reasons to receive them. Colonel Timothy Pickering wrote to Alexander Hamilton, Washington's aide-de-camp, in 1781 that, "Hundreds of Soldiers Families are . . . distressed. What is granted to one should not be denied to another in like Circumstances . . . But if we begin to discharge Soldiers to relive their distress'd families, where shall we stop?"⁶³ To prevent excessive furloughs, Washington quietly made concessions for soldiers' suffering wives and families. He wrote to General Henry Knox in 1781 that he much preferred to provide camp women and children with rations "or by driving them from the Army risk the loss of a number of Men, who very probably would have followed their Wives."⁶⁴

Although it committed to providing rations for camp followers, the Continental Army could scarcely muster enough provisions to consistently feed its soldiers throughout the war; thus, the army struggled to feed camp followers, as well. In August 1775, Washington ordered the following rations for every soldier:

One pound of fresh beef, or $\frac{3}{4}$ of a pound of Pork, or one pound of Salt Fish, per diem.
One pound of Bread, or Flour per diem.
Three pints of Peas, or Beans per Week, or Vegetables equivalent
One pint of milk per man, per diem, where to be had.
One half pint of Rice, or one pint of Indian meal per Man, per Week.
One quart of Spruce Beer per man, per diem, or 9 Gallons of molasses per Company of 100 Men.
Three pounds of Candles to 100 Men per Week

⁶² George Washington, "General Orders, 17 November 1775," in *Founders Online*, accessed 20 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-02-02-0358>.

⁶³ Colonel Timothy Pickering to Alexander Hamilton, Newburgh, 2 February 1781, in *Founders Online*, accessed 20 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-1053>.

⁶⁴ George Washington to Henry Knox, 8 March 1783, in *Founders Online*, accessed 20 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-10794>.

Twenty-four pounds of soft, or eight pounds of hard Soap for 100 Men per week. One Ration of Salt, one ditto fresh, and two ditto Bread, to be delivered Monday morning; Wednesday morning the same. Friday morning the same, and one ditto salt Fish.⁶⁵

According to Robert Dunkerly, a full ration provided soldiers with 2,400 to 2,700 calories, which did not fully compensate for their activity levels.⁶⁶ Camp women, though officially entitled to rations, were even less likely than soldiers to consistently receive this entire amount. Sometimes they received full rations, sometimes half, and sometimes none at all, and they always had to share these rations with their children.

The availability of decent rations fluctuated throughout the war. Rather than all the provisions listed above, soldiers and camp followers received what was available. A major period of starvation occurred in the winter of 1777-1778 at Valley Forge. In *Private Yankee Doodle*, Private Joseph Plumb Martin wrote that he was so desperate with fatigue and thirst that he “would have taken victuals or drink from the best friend I had on earth by force,” and that he spent “two nights and one day and had not a morsel of anything to eat.” When the soldiers finally received rations, the quartermaster gave them just a little meat, a little bread, and some liquor.⁶⁷ Surgeon Albigen Waldo noted “A general cry thro’ the Camp . . . among the Soldiers, ‘No Meat! No Meat!’”⁶⁸ Colonel Israel Angell wrote that food was

⁶⁵ George Washington, “General Orders, Cambridge, 8 August 1775,” In *George Washington Papers, Series 3, Varick Transcripts, 1785, Subseries 3G, General Orders, 1783, Letterbook 1: July 3 – September 30, 1776*, Manuscript/Mixed Material, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mgw3g.001/>.

⁶⁶ Dunkerly, *Women of the Revolution*, 33.

⁶⁷ Joseph Plumb Martin, *Private Yankee Doodle: Being a Narrative of Some of the Adventures, Dangers, and Sufferings of a Revolutionary Soldier*, ed. George Scheer (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1962), 103-104.

⁶⁸ Hugh F. Rankin, *Narratives of the American Revolution as Told by a Young Sailor, a Home-sick Surgeon, a French Volunteer, and a German General’s Wife* (Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1976), 185-186.

so scarce soldiers and camp followers ate “Suppers of raw corn” taken from a farmer’s field.⁶⁹ Sutlers established fruit and vegetable markets at Valley Forge, but soldiers and camp women had little money with which to purchase them.⁷⁰ Rations were not always as scarce as they were in the winter at Valley Forge, and the availability of provisions increased as the war progressed. By 1783, when the war was nearly won and soldiers had more free time, Washington recommended that they create regimental gardens to supplement their rations with fresh vegetables.⁷¹

Although the availability of provisions improved later in the war, the Continental Army continued to struggle with providing adequate rations to camp women. The army attempted to standardize the amount of rations set aside for camp followers so that it would not give more food than necessary to each regiment. Washington ordered in 1782 that quartermasters provide sixteen rations for every fifteen men in each regiment, allotting the extra rations for women.⁷² However, this system was deeply ineffective because the number of camp women rarely conformed to a clean 1:15 ratio. This led to a shortage of rations in regiments with many women and an excess in camps with few. Washington revised this system in 1783, deciding that “it was better to submit to a surplusage in some Corps than to render the expence greater and the evil more extensive by adopting a limitation which would pervade the whole Army.” Washington felt “obliged to give

⁶⁹ Israel Angell, *Diary of Israel Angell: Commanding the Second Rhode Island Continental Regiment during the American Revolution, 1778-1781*, transcribed by Edward Field and Norman Desmarias (Providence, Rhode Island: Preston and Rounds Company, 1889), 13.

⁷⁰ Loane, *Following the Drum*, 137.

⁷¹ George Washington, “General Orders, 24 March 1783,” in *Founders Online*, accessed 20 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-10906>.

⁷² George Washington, “General Orders, 28 December 1782,” in *Founder Online*, accessed 20 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-10313>.

Provisions to the extra women in these Regiments or lose by Desertion – perhaps to the Enemy – some of the oldest and best Soldiers in the Service”⁷³ By this time, the war was nearly over; Washington’s concessions had little effect. Camp women spent most of the war in varying states of hunger. It was beneficial for them to stay with the army, as no one promised them provisions if they remained at home. Still, they struggled to fill their bellies in the Continental Army camps.

Another challenge camp followers faced was inadequate clothing. The Earth experienced a “Little Ice Age” from the fourteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, which made winters terribly cold during the American Revolution. In addition, clothing was expensive and very valuable; camp women likely had one set of clothing – or perhaps two, if they were lucky – and these clothes wore out quickly in the rigors of army life. Although the Continental Army promised protection and provision to camp women, it did not promise them clothes. Loane writes in *Following the Drum* that only four articles of women’s clothing came into camp at Valley Forge: three petticoats and one pair of shoes.⁷⁴

Camp women in both armies engaged in a constant battle for clothing, and they usually resorted to stealing clothes from nearby towns, dead soldiers on the battlefield, or sick patients in hospitals. Thus, they always appeared in a curious mishmash of clothes. Army officials frequently condemned this necessary behavior throughout the war. General Cornwallis ordered “an immediate inspection of the articles of clothing at present in possession of the women . . . and every article found in addition thereto, burned at the head

⁷³ George Washington to Robert Morris, Newburgh, 29 January 1783, in *Founders Online*, accessed 20 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-10529/>.

⁷⁴ Loane, *Following the Drum*, 117.



Figure 2. Colonial Camp Follower, American Revolution, 2014, by Don Troiani. Courtesy of W. Britain.

of the company, except such as have been fairly purchased.”⁷⁵ Washington wrote from Valley Forge that some recovered hospital patients were “incapable of marching to Camp for want of Cloaths and Necessaries.”⁷⁶ Ambrose Collins of the Connecticut militia regiment wrote after the battles of Saratoga that American women “exposed themselves where the shots were flying, to strip the dead,” and he “saw one woman while thus employed, struck by a cannon ball and literally dashed to pieces. [He] also saw the women attempting to strip a wounded Hessian officer. One woman was attempting to get his watch. He was able to speak and although they could not understand what he said he made so much resistance that they left him.”⁷⁷ Although plundering clothes greatly contributed to their negative depiction, camp women did what they must to provide for themselves, their husbands, and their children.

Some camp women followed the army into battle and faced the threat of enemy fire. The British and Continental armies left most of their women in camp while on the march, especially those overburdened with women. Officers forced many women to remain in camp or move to a different one preceding a battle, most of them being frail or disobedient women and women with children who proved least beneficial to the army. The commander of Fort Sullivan ordered in September 1779 that “The Invalids & all supernumery Officers that have no Charge of Baggage are to go to Wyoming as soon as Conveneant, all Woemen that are Not Absolutely Necessary as Nurses in the Hospital, or

⁷⁵ Dunkerly, *Women of the Revolution*, 94.

⁷⁶ George Washington to Officers Superintending Hospitals, Valley Forge, 28 February 1778, in *Founders Online*, accessed 20 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0595>.

⁷⁷ Lewis Mills Norton, *History of the Town of Goshen, Connecticut with Genealogies and Biographies*, ed. Augustine George Hibbard (Hartford, Connecticut: Press of the Case, Lockwood & Brainard Company, 1897), 146.

to Wash for the troops, are Also to Go Down to that Post.”⁷⁸ Prior to battle in August 1781, Washington advised Major General Lincoln to “take the present opportunity of depositing at West Point such of their Women as are not able to undergo the fatigue of frequent marches.”⁷⁹ Those left behind, though removed from the risks of battle, had to agonize over their husbands and wonder whether they lived or died. Many women much preferred to follow the army despite the dangers of battle.

Those permitted to march with the army followed behind the baggage wagons, and officers often referred to women as being baggage themselves. For example, Doctor James Thatcher wrote that “In the rear followed a great number of wagons loaded with tents, provisions and other baggage such as a few soldiers’ wives and children; though a very small number of these are allowed to encumber us on this occasion.”⁸⁰ Although men considered them an incumbrance, women provided essential assistance in battles. When they were not plundering clothes from the battlefield, their primary duty was carrying food, water, and ammunition to soldiers in the trenches. At the Battle of Yorktown, Sarah Osborn Benjamin carried provisions to men in the entrenchments. While thus employed, Benjamin claimed that General Washington approached her and asked if she “was not afraid of the

⁷⁸ Garrison Orders, Fort Sullivan, 13 September 1779, Myers’s German Regiment Orderly Book, in Holly Mayer, *Belonging to the Army: Camp Followers and Community during the American Revolution* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 137.

⁷⁹ George Washington, “General Orders, 22 August 1781,” in *Founders Online*, accessed 20 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-06751>.

⁸⁰ James Thatcher, *A Military Journal During the American Revolutionary War, from 1775 to 1783 Describing Interesting Events and Transactions of this Period; with Numerous Historical Facts and Anecdotes, from the Original Manuscript. To which is Added, an Appendix, Containing Biographical Sketches of Several General Officers* (Boston: Cottons & Barnard, 1827), 262-264.



Figure 3. Molly Pitcher at the Battle of Monmouth, 1778, copy of engraving by J.C. Armytage after Alonzo Chappel. Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

cannonballs.” “No,” she replied, “the bullets would not cheat the gallows. It would not do for the men to fight and starve, too.”⁸¹

Women like Benjamin who carried water and other necessities to soldiers created the character of “Molly Pitcher,” a prominent but apocryphal figure in the narrative of the American Revolution. Molly Pitcher was a generic term for camp women assisting the Continental Army in battles. However, some historians point to Mary Ludwig Hayes as the true origin of this character. Emily J. Teipe writes in “Will the Real Molly Pitcher Please Stand Up?” that Mary Hayes, daughter of German immigrants and wife of barber John

⁸¹ Sarah Osborn Benjamin, *Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files* (NARA: #M804, W. 4558), <https://www.fold3.com/image/25753052>.

Hayes, followed her husband to Captain Francis Proctor's Pennsylvania Artillery Company in 1778. Soldiers described her as a young, uneducated pregnant woman who "smoked, chewed tobacco, and swore, and endeared herself to [them] because of her courage and hard work." Hayes brought water to the soldiers during the Battle of Monmouth, in which the temperature surpassed 110° Fahrenheit and heat stroke felled more men than bullets. When her husband collapsed from either heat or injury, Hayes took over his artillery position. She received a pension for her heroic actions after the war.⁸²

Margaret Cochran Corbin, another camp follower who served in the same regiment as Mary Hayes, had a similar experience in the 1776 Battle of Fort Washington. Corbin, fondly referred to as "Captain Molly" by the men in her regiment, took up her husband's artillery position when he was killed in the battle. She was severely injured in doing so – enemy fire mangled her chest, damaged her jaw, and nearly tore off her arm. She was awarded full rations for her efforts and assigned to the Invalid Corps.⁸³ In June 1779, Congress awarded her \$30.00. In July 1779, Congress awarded her half pay for life or until she recovered from her injuries, along with a one-time gift of clothes; this made Corbin the first woman given a pension during the American Revolution. In July 1780, Congress supplemented her pension with a yearly set of clothes or its cash value every year. Corbin moved to Highland Falls, New York after her time following the army, where, in 1800, she drank heavily and died from her wounds, which never fully healed, at age forty-eight. Highland Falls residents knew her only as an alcoholic and referred to her as "Dirty Kate,"

⁸² Emily J. Teipe, "Will the Real Molly Pitcher Please Stand Up?" *Prologue Magazine* 31, no. 2 (Summer 1999): <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1999/summer/pitcher.html#nt1>.

⁸³ Loane, *Following the Drum*, 139-140.

not knowing about her heroic actions at Fort Washington.⁸⁴ In 1926, Corbin finally received the merit she deserved when the Daughters of the American Revolution moved her body to a place of honor at the West Point Military Academy.⁸⁵

Not all camp women displayed heroics like Mary Hayes and Margaret Corbin, but all of them provided vital assistance to the army and risked their lives by doing so. Some women, instead of plundering clothes from the battlefield, trudged through enemy fire to bring ammunition to the soldiers. At the Battles of Saratoga, Thomas Anburey recalled seeing “several dead bodies belonging to the enemy, and amongst them were laying close to each other, two men and a woman, the latter of whom had her arms extended, and her hands grasping cartridges.”⁸⁶ Even when they were not under the direct line of fire, stray bullets and cannon shots endangered women because of the inaccuracy of eighteenth-century firearms, poor marksmanship, and their general proximity to battles. In 1778, Joseph Plumb Martin recalled a camp woman’s light-hearted reaction to a near-death experience:

A woman whose husband belonged to the artillery and who was then attached to a piece in the engagement, attended with her husband at the piece the whole time. While in the act of reaching a cartridge and having one of her feet as far before the other as she could step, a cannon shot from the enemy passed directly between her legs without doing any other damage than carrying away all the lower part of her petticoat. Looking at it with apparent unconcern, she observed that it was lucky it did not pass a little higher, for in that case it might have carried away something else, and continued her occupation.”⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, 139.

⁸⁵ “‘Capt. Molly’ is Reburied: Remains of Revolution Heroine Are Laid to Rest at West Point,” *New York Times*, 17 March 1926, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, https://www.dar.org/sites/default/files/NewYorkTimes_3.17.1926_CAPTMollieisReburied.pdf.

⁸⁶ Thomas Anburey, *Travels through the Interior Parts of America, Volume I* (Boston, New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1923), 258.

⁸⁷ Martin, *Private Yankee Doodle*, 132-133.

At the Battle of Brandywine, Jacob Nagle witnessed a woman stirring porridge in a kettle one hundred yards from the rear of the artillery. A British cannonball shot through the camp, hit the woman's kettle, and dumped its contents on the ground. Nagle missed his breakfast that morning.⁸⁸ History likes to remember women who masqueraded as soldiers like Deborah Sampson, of which there were very few, and Molly Pitcher, who did not exist. However, the typical camp woman following the army deserves praise for their bravery and assistance to soldiers in battle.

Camp followers, though only considered *with* the army and not *part* of the army, were still subjected to military orders. Generally, army officials did not like them, and they spent the entire war trying to regulate the necessary evil of camp followers. In the French and Indian War, Americans became familiar with camp followers with the British Army. They noticed that camp women encumbered army movements, rarely adhered to military orders, and sometimes slacked on their duties; thus, they came to the conclusion that camp followers caused too much trouble, and they did not want them to follow the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War.⁸⁹ However, camp followers were inevitable. The army needed them to perform essential services, and, as mentioned, soldiers would not remain with the army if it did not care for their wives. Officers tolerated camp women because of their vital assistance to the camps, but they still considered them a drain on resources and frequently tried to reign them into army control.

The Continental Army could not regulate the type of women allowed to reside in camp. In the British Army, officers required that soldiers ask their permission to marry to

⁸⁸ Jacob Nagle, *The Nagle Journal: A Diary of the Life of Jacob Nagle, Sailor, from the Year 1775 to 1841*, ed. John C. Dann (New York: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1988), 7.

⁸⁹ Mayer, *Belonging to the Army*, 10.

ensure that only decent and industrious women follow the army. Americans could not do this. Most soldiers in the Continental Army were not career soldiers – they came from all walks of life and took up arms for the common cause of independence. Thus, they had established lives and families and were not as prepared to leave them for months on end like a British career soldier. In addition, because Americans fought the war in their own country, they were more likely to bring their wives to camp than British soldiers, whose wives had to travel across the Atlantic to join their husbands.⁹⁰ Thus, Continental officers could not weed out lazy or delinquent soldiers' wives with as much precision as British officers; instead, they did their best to regulate the behavior of camp followers and bring them under military control.

The primary issue army officials tried to regulate was camp women riding on baggage wagons as they traveled with the troops, as the added weight slowed down the wagons. In five separate instances, General Washington himself issued orders that women abstain from this behavior. On July 4, 1777, Washington ordered that “no women shall be permitted to ride in any waggon, without leave in writing from the Brigadier to whose brigade she belongs Any woman found in a waggon contrary to this regulation, is to be immediately turned out...”⁹¹ On July 10, 1777, he reiterated that “Women are to march with the baggage.”⁹² On August 27, 1777, Washington “expressly forbid” that officers allow any women “under any license at all” to ride on the wagons, and he encouraged them to limit the number of women to no more than are “absolutely necessary” and “actually

⁹⁰ Dunkerly, *Women of the Revolution*, 18.

⁹¹ George Washington, “General Orders, 4 July 1777,” in *Founders Online*, accessed 21 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0179>.

⁹² George Washington, “General Orders, 10 July 1777,” in *Founders Online*, accessed 21 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0230>.

useful.”⁹³ He ordered again on October 11, 1778 that “officers are to see that the soldiers and Women who march with the baggage do not transgress the General Orders made for their Government.”⁹⁴ Finally, he wrote on August 22, 1781 that officers dispense with any woman who could not march behind the baggage wagons.⁹⁵ Clearly, camp women paid no heed to this recurring problem, as the Commander-in-Chief himself had to repeat these orders throughout the entire war.

Because of their notorious slovenly appearances and incumbrance on the army, officials also ordered camp women to remain unseen as soldiers marched through major cities. Prior to a march through Philadelphia in 1777, George Washington ordered that “not a woman belonging to the army is to be seen with the troops on their march thro’ the city” but should “. . . avoid the City entirely . . . so as to not impede the march of the troops, by preventing their passing them.”⁹⁶ A Philadelphia resident observed that, at first, the camp followers “spirited off into the quaint, dirty little alleyways and side streets.” However, “the army had barely passed through the main thoroughfares before these camp followers poured after their soldiers again, their hair flying, their brows beady with the heat, their belongings slung over one shoulder, chattering and yelling in sluttish shrills as they went and spitting in the gutters.”⁹⁷

⁹³ George Washington, “General Orders, 27 August 1777,” in *Founders Online*, accessed 21 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-11-02-0067>.

⁹⁴ George Washington, “General Orders, 11 October 1778,” in *Founders Online*, accessed 21 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-17-02-0359>.

⁹⁵ George Washington, “General Orders, 22 August 1781,” in *Founders Online*, accessed 20 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-06751>.

⁹⁶ George Washington, “General Orders, 23 August 1777,” in *Founders Online*, accessed 21 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-11-02-0047>.

⁹⁷ Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, 55-56.

Army officers issued orders to prevent prostitution in camp, which proved more successful than their attempts to keep women off baggage wagons and out of the way in marches. Unfortunately, they failed to keep their soldiers' from dallying with prostitutes outside of camp. In May 1776, Colonel Alexander McDougall of the 1st New York Regiment ordered that "No Woman of Ill Fame Shall be permitted to come into the Barricks on pain of Being well Watred under a pump, and Every Officer or Soldier who Shall Bring in Any Such woman will be tryd and Punished by a Court Martial." However, prostitution was hardly a problem within army camps; most prostitutes recognized that spending time in poor American encampments was bad business. Rather, soldiers frequented brothels while stationed near densely-populated cities. The infamous "Holy Ground" is a prime example. Named after its ironic ownership by Trinity Church, Holy Ground served as the center for prostitution in New York City and frequently entertained soldiers from both armies. Army officials worried that their men would contract venereal diseases from prostitutes and be rendered unfit for service; yet, the army could not govern soldiers' every action outside the encampments, and they could not stop them from visiting brothels. When prostitutes did venture into army camps, officers ordered them out. In 1778, for example, a prostitute named Polly Robinson entered the encampment of the 5th Massachusetts Regiment. The next day, army officials arrested and court-martialed her, then drummed her out of camp. It must be noted that very few camp women engaged in prostitution; most prostitutes were outsiders, but their presence brought a bad reputation to other camp women.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Mayer, *Belonging to the Army*, 111-112.

It is clear that camp followers did not religiously adhere to military orders. Excessive repetition of orders without adequate enforcement did not foster obedience; still, camp women faced military discipline. As declared in the 1776 American Articles of War, “All suttlers and retainers to a camp, and all persons whatsoever serving with the armies of the United States in the field, though no inlisted soldier, are to be subject to orders, according to the rules and discipline of war.”⁹⁹ If camp followers disobeyed these orders, they could be punished or dismissed from camp. Possible punishments for their various transgressions included revoking rations, whipping, confinement, and – very rarely – death.

A common crime committed by camp women was stealing. In December 1777 at Valley Forge, Colonel Israel Angell wrote that Sarah Van Kirk was drummed out of camp for stealing.¹⁰⁰ In December 1779, Angell noted that “Mrs. Thomas, a Soldiers wife in the Regiment . . . [stole] from a woman.” Angell “ordered all the Drums and fifes to parade and Drum her out of the Regiment with a paper pind to her back, with these words in Cappital letters, / A THIEF / thus She went off with Musick.”¹⁰¹

A far more serious crime was encouraging desertion. In 1778, General George Weedon wrote that a court-martial found camp follower Mary Johnson guilty of plotting desertion to the enemy and sentenced her to one hundred lashes before drumming her out of camp. That same year, Ann McIntosh of the 2nd Virginia Regiment, along with her husband William, were arrested for mutiny and desertion at Valley Forge, though Washington acquitted them.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Continental Congress, *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, September 20, 1776, <https://lccn.loc.gov/05000059>.

¹⁰⁰ Angell, *Diary of Israel Angell*, 14.

¹⁰¹ Angell, *Diary of Israel Angell*, 76.

¹⁰² Loane, *Following the Drum*, 126-127.

If camp followers neglected their responsibilities or improperly carried them out, they risked military discipline. For example, the army restricted sutlers' sale of liquor in camp, and camp women faced punishment if they disobeyed this order and sold immoderate quantities of alcohol to soldiers. In July 1775, Washington ordered that "any Sutler, Tavern-keeper, or licenced Innholder, who . . . sell[s] any non-commissioned Officer, or Soldier, any spirituous liquor whatsoever, without an Order in writing, from the Captain of the company to which such non-Commissioned Officer and Soldier belongs; he or they so offending, may expect to be severely punished."¹⁰³

Army officials also ordered that camp women keep their regiments clean and comply with regulations on their labor. In 1779, Colonel James Chambers of the 1st Pennsylvania Regiment ordered that the camp be "Swept and Cleaned of all filth, the front of the Regiment to be Cleaned as far as the Reare of the Kitchens . . . there is no Cooking to Be Carried on in the front of the Regiments, excepting in the Kitchens only; the women is strictly forbidden to wash in frount of the tents or to [throw] soap suds or any other Kind of filth on the Regimental Parade."¹⁰⁴ If camp women disobeyed, they could lose their rations or be drummed out of camp. In 1778, the 2nd Pennsylvania Regiment ordered that if "any woman refuse to wash for a soldier at the above rate he must make complaint to the officers commanding the company to which he belongs...who [if they] find it proceeds from laziness or any other improper excuse," they could drum the woman out of camp.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ George Washington, "General Orders, 11 July 1775," in *Founders Online*, accessed 21 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-01-02-0055>.

¹⁰⁴ John Blair Linn, Joseph McClellan, and William Henry Egle, eds., *Pennsylvania in the War of the Revolution, Battalions, and Line* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: L. S. Hart, State Printer, 1880), 465.

¹⁰⁵ Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, 57.

Finally, the army disciplined any woman it found with a venereal disease. Just as the army tried to stop prostitution to keep its men healthy, it also tried to stop the spread among the soldiers and women in camp. Captain Robert Kirkwood of the Delaware Battalion ordered in July 1777:

That the Weomen belonging to the Regt be paraded tomorrow morning & to undergo an Examination from the Serjeon of the Regt at his tent, except those that are married, & the husbands of those to undergo said examination in their Stead, all those that do not attent to be immedietly Drum'd out of the Regt.¹⁰⁶

Scarcely two weeks later, Kirkwood recorded that “This Day there was a Women Duct and Drum’d out of our Encampment; For giving the men the Venerial Disorder.”¹⁰⁷ Holly Mayer writes that frequent threats of military discipline and the lack of consistent follow through lessened their impact and led to disobedience. For those who were actually punished for their transgressions, their punishments did not deter unwanted behavior; for example, women drummed out of camp often returned and continued doing as they pleased.¹⁰⁸

Camp women did not always find themselves on the wrong end of military discipline; sometimes, they had access to the army’s legal system to seek justice for crimes committed against them. At Fort Sullivan in September 1779, a court-martial found soldier John Emersly guilty of stealing camp follower Catharina Castner’s clothing and selling it. Emersly received one hundred lashes, and the army gave a portion of his pay to Castner every month until she was reimbursed for the cost of her clothing. At Fort Schuyler in

¹⁰⁶ Kirkwood, *The Journal and Order Book of Captain Robert Kirkwood of the Delaware Regiment of the Continental Line*, 94

¹⁰⁷ Kirkwood, *The Journal and Order Book of Captain Robert Kirkwood of the Delaware Regiment of the Continental Line*, 105.

¹⁰⁸ Mayer, *Belonging to the Army*, 136.

1781, a court-martial found soldier Isaac Mott guilty of abusing camp follower Mrs. Moody and her daughter. While it was more common that camp women were defendants in court-martials, their incorporation into the camp community granted them occasional access to its legal system – especially when the transgression of the defendants disobeyed military discipline at large.¹⁰⁹

Although they encumbered the army and disobeyed its rules, camp women were still vital to the Continental Army. Without their assistance in laundering, nursing, sutting, mending, cooking, and more, the army could not have functioned. Its troops would wear filthy rags before they demeaned themselves to sew and wash. Too many soldiers would be nursing patients in hospitals rather than soldiering on the battlefield. Their access to necessary merchandise would decrease. Simply put, the Continental Army needed women to care for its needs in its infancy when it lacked the infrastructure to care for itself. Doing soldiers' laundry seems such a trivial thing, but, then again, the American Revolution, as with every historical event, is comprised of little things.

¹⁰⁹ Mayer, *Belonging to the Army*, 134-135

CHAPTER TWO

Although they made important contributions to the Continental Army, camp followers rarely receive due credit for their efforts. In fact, most of their contemporaries disliked them. This is because eighteenth-century rules of femininity, set by those with greater means than camp women, could not be followed by the lower-class women with the army. Society demanded that good, respectable women display public and private virtue, exhibiting qualities of chastity, modesty, selflessness, delicacy, tenderness, and more. In the rough environment of army camps, however, women did not have the privilege to follow these social norms even if they wanted to do so. Thus, contemporary observers neglected their significance to the cause because they focused only on their perceived flaws.

Army officials in particular frowned upon camp followers because it was their responsibility to control them. Despite their necessity to the Continental Army, George Washington himself called camp followers “a clog upon every movement” and considered them a great incumbrance on the army.¹¹⁰ Paul E. Kopperman explains why officers were so hostile to camp women in his article “The British High Command and Soldiers’ Wives in America.” He writes that officers accepted their soldiers’ imperfections because they could not have an army without them; however, officers had less incentive to accept faults in camp followers because they believed that the army would benefit from a reduction in their numbers. Officers did not consider camp women truly essential to the army, either;

¹¹⁰ George Washington, “General Orders, 4 August 1777,” in *Founders Online*, accessed 18 February 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0508>.

despite the necessity of the tasks they performed, none of these tasks were exclusively theirs. Men cooked, nursed, and laundered for themselves when necessary, and they outsourced some other tasks to civilian laborers. Thus, Kopperman argues, camp women “lacked the unique ability or role that might have served to neutralize the prejudice of their superiors.”¹¹¹ Thus, they did not appear to be an integral part of the army and consequently received greater critiques from officers.

Soldiers, too, looked down upon camp women. Joseph Plumb Martin recorded a particularly derogatory opinion of camp followers in his journal:

Of all specimens of human beings, this group [camp women] capped the whole. A caravan of wild beasts could bear no comparison with it. There was ‘Tag, Rag and Bobtail’; ‘some in rags and some in jags,’ but none ‘in velvet gowns.’ Some with two eyes, some with one, and some, I believe, with none at all. They ‘beggared all description’; their dialect, too, was as confused as their bodily appearance was odd and disgusting. There was the Irish and Scotch brogue, murdered English, flat insipid Dutch and some lingoos which would puzzle a philosopher to tell whether they belonged to this world or some ‘undiscovered country.’¹¹²

In 1780, an officer traveling with Joseph Plumb Martin delivered a similarly foul account.

He declared that camp women were:

The ugliest in the world to be collected...their Visage dress etc every way concordant to each other – some with two others with three & four children & few with none – I could not help pitying the poor innocent Creatures – their way of living and treatment with the many low & Scandalous examples ev’ry day shown them will make them imitate their Parents vices; and make many who have naturally good dispositions as vicious as the worst of them – the furies who inhabit the infernal Regions can never be painted half so hideous as these women.”¹¹³

¹¹¹ Paul E. Kopperman, “The British High Command and Soldiers’ Wives in America,” *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 60, no. 241 (Spring 1982): 21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44229547>.

¹¹² Martin, *Private Yankee Doodle*, 197-198.

¹¹³ Elias Parker, 20 September 1780, in Continental Army, *Military Life*, Diary 21 April – 25 September 1780, Virginia Historical Society, in Holly Mayer, *Belonging to the Army: Camp Followers and Community during the American Revolution* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 126.

Ambrose Collins of the Connecticut militia wrote that camp women “were doubtless the basest of their sex.”¹¹⁴ A British soldier remarked that camp followers who refused to follow the baggage train on marches were a “swarm of beings – no better than harpies” who “distress and maltreat [civilians] infinitely more than the whole army, at the same time they engross, waste and destroy at the expense of the good soldier, who keeps his ranks.”¹¹⁵ A surgeon at Valley Forge, possibly Albigen Waldo, even wrote a scurrilous poem about the women with his regiment:

What! though there are, in rags, in crepe,
Some beings here in female shape
In whom may still be found some traces
Of former beauty in their faces.
Yet now so far from being nice
They boast of every barefaced vice.
Shame to their sex!
Tis not in these one e’er beholds
These charms that please.¹¹⁶

Private Daniel Granger had a more sympathetic view of the camp followers he saw attached to German troops after their defeat at Saratoga, writing that these bare-footed women dressed in rags and carrying children and heavy packs were “silent, civil, and looked quite subdued.”¹¹⁷

Civilians also made comments about the camp followers they saw. A Boston woman watching German prisoners march through the city wrote that the women “seemed

¹¹⁴ Norton, *History of the Town of Goshen, Connecticut with Genealogies and Biographies*, 146.

¹¹⁵ Sylvia R. Frey, *The British Soldier in America: A Social History of Military Life in the Revolutionary Period* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2012), 76.

¹¹⁶ John B. B. Trussell, *Birthplace of an Army: A Study of the Valley Forge Encampment* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1976), 84.

¹¹⁷ M. M. Quaife, “A Boy Soldier Under Washington: The Memoir of Daniel Granger,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 16, no. 4 (March 1930): 547.

to be the beasts of burthen, having a bushel basket on their back, by which they were bent double, the contents seemed to be Pots and Kettles, various sorts of Furniture, children peeping thro' gridirons and other utensils, some very young Infants who were born on the road, the women bare feet, cloathed in dirty rags..."¹¹⁸ After seeing these German camp followers, Hannah Winthrop wrote to famed poet and playwright Mercy Otis Warren that she "never had the least Idea that the Creation produced such a sordid set of creatures in human figure," and "such effluvia filled the air while they were passing, had they not been smoking at the time, I should have been apprehensive of being contaminated by them."¹¹⁹

Officers, soldiers, and civilians held these negative views on camp followers primarily because they broke the boundaries of eighteenth-century feminine values. Contemporary standards demanded that ladies display a "native Female softness: and be "pure, tender, delicate, affectionate, flexible, and patient," according to a 1794 *Massachusetts Magazine* article.¹²⁰ The Reverend James Fordyce wrote in his 1776 publication *Sermons to Young Women* that "Meekness, cultivated on Christian principles, is the proper consummation, and highest finishing, of female excellence," and the best of women were timid, subservient, and had little worth outside of their appearances.¹²¹ Clearly, camp followers did not fit this description. Part of their denigration came from

¹¹⁸ John U. Rees, "'Some in Rags and Some in Jags' but None 'in Velvet Gowns': Insights on Clothing Worn by Female Followers of the Armies During the American War for Independence," *Association of Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums* XXVIII, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 20.

¹¹⁹ Loane, *Following the Drum*, 115.

¹²⁰ Lavater, "General Remarks on Women," *Massachusetts Magazine* VI (January 1794): 20, in Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 1980), 112.

¹²¹ James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women* (London: A. Millar and T. Cadell, 1766), 110-111.

being women in a male-dominated environment. Although they performed the necessary tasks of laundering, nursing, cooking, sewing, and more in Continental Army camps, they received no praise for the importance of their presence in the army – neither men nor women in the eighteenth century lauded women’s work. Mary Beth Norton writes in *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* that contemporaries viewed wifely duties as necessary but inconsequential chores, which created “an inadequate prop for feminine self-esteem.” Norton shows that women themselves revealed how little they valued themselves through their vocabulary: they demeaned their responsibilities by referring to them as “my Narrow sphere,” my “humble duties,” and “my little Domestick affairs.”¹²² Thus, popular sentiment on camp women was already at a disadvantage because they were women.

However, public perception of camp women was far more negative than the perception of women who remained at home during the war – particularly those women who were not in the lower class. This is because the hardships of war and poverty did not allow camp women to behave like the dainty ladies society wished they would be. Barbara Welter argued in her seminal work “The Cult of True Womanhood” that a “true woman” of the eighteenth-century confined herself to the domestic sphere and did not engage in masculine work or behavior.¹²³ While this idea remains prevalent in much historiography, Mary Beth Norton challenged this argument in her 2011 work *Separated by Their Sex: Women in Public and Private in the Colonial Atlantic World*. Norton argues that when necessity required it, such as in times of war, women were allowed to act outside of their

¹²² Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters*, 38.

¹²³ Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 152.

traditionally accepted roles. This necessity excused their masculine actions and temporarily extended the reach of the feminine sphere.¹²⁴ However, this argument only applies to women who accepted masculine responsibilities gracefully and with a sense of obligation. It does not apply to camp women, whose lower-class status made their lives more challenging and thereby prevented them from being ladylike in the first place.

Unlike camp followers, women who remained at home received far more praise for their patriotic contributions to the American Revolution. Camp followers garnered criticism more for their social class than their sex. Rosemarie Zagarri explains in *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* that Enlightenment thinking drastically changed the perception of women's value and capabilities in the decades leading up to the Revolutionary War. Whereas classical thinkers degraded women and saw them as the inferior gender, works like François Poulain de la Barre's *The Equality of the Two Sexes* (1675), John Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* (1689), and William Alexander's *History of Women* (1779) asserted women's intellectual equality to men.¹²⁵

Patriots praised women for their contributions to the revolution *if* they conformed to traditional gender norms. Women who did not follow the army assisted the war effort by collecting ammunition, sewing clothes for soldiers, organizing fundraising campaigns, serving as “deputy husbands” by attending to men's chores while they were away, and – most importantly – boycotting British goods.¹²⁶ Boycotts were an essential form of protest

¹²⁴ Mary Beth Norton, *Separated by Their Sex: Women in Public and Private in the Colonial American World* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2011), xii.

¹²⁵ Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 11-14.

¹²⁶ Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 22-23.

in the resistance years; colonists believed that British laborers, whose livelihoods depended on colonial consumption, would convince their government to repeal hated taxes so colonists would resume buying the merchandise they produced. T. H. Breen argues in *The Marketplace of Revolution* that boycotting, a wholly new form of protest, opened the door for women to participate in politics because of their identity as consumers.

Although women did not traditionally participate in politics, boycotts could not succeed without their ardent participation. Women, as managers of their households, had crucial purchasing power that could make or break the effectiveness of boycotts.¹²⁷ Thus, patriot leaders and print media pandered to women and stressed their importance and necessity to the cause of independence. For example, in 1769, the Boston Evening Post wrote that “the industry and frugality of American ladies must exalt their character in the Eyes of the World and serve to show how greatly they are contributing to bring about the political salvation of a whole Continent.”¹²⁸ William Tennant III explained in his 1774 publication “To the Ladies of South Carolina” that women’s participation in the boycott of tea was vital to its success, writing that they could “convince [Britain] that American Patriotism extends even to the fair Sex, & discourage any future Attempts to enslave us.”¹²⁹ That same year, upper-class North Carolinian Penelope Barker organized the Edenton Tea Party, in which 51 patriot women signed a resolution to boycott British tea and drink alternatives made from local herbs. In their resolution, the women agreed that as they

¹²⁷ T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 236.

¹²⁸ “Journal of the Times,” *The Boston Evening-Post*, 29 May 1769.

¹²⁹ William Tennent III, “To the Ladies of South Carolina,” in *Travel Journal and Album of Collected Papers of William Tennent III, 1740-1777*, University of South Carolina Collection, 46 <http://www.sc.edu/library/digital/collections/tennent.html>.



Figure 4. A satirical political cartoon depicting the Edenton Tea Party in a London newspaper. *A Society of Patriotic Ladies, at Edenton in North Carolina, 1775*, Philip Dawe. Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

“cannot be indifferent on any occasion that appears nearly to affect the peace and happiness of our country . . . it is a duty which we owe, not only to our near and dear connections who have concurred in them, but to ourselves who are essentially interested in their welfare, to do everything as far as lies in our power . . .”¹³⁰ This was the first women’s political demonstration in American history, and it clearly aligns with traditional women’s values. The resolution uses words such as “peace,” “happiness,” “duty,” and “welfare,” which line up with women’s roles as caretakers and reluctant political participants.

Because they benefited the revolutionary cause within the confines of eighteenth-century feminine values, these women earned the praise of their peers and their successors. In New Jersey Governor William Livingston’s essay “Our Grand-Mothers,” Livingston criticizes contemporary women’s neglect of these values and romanticizes the “Republican Mothers” of the Revolutionary Era. He stresses that they “placed their renown” in their families’ welfare, promoted economy and industry in their households, and found “happiness in their chimney corners.”¹³¹ This praise exclusively refers to women – particularly those from the middle and upper classes – who assisted the war effort from home. It excluded lower-class camp followers who did not and could not appear as delicate and dutiful ladies, even though their support was just as crucial to the American cause.

Remembrance of even upper-class women’s contributions to the American Revolution dissipated as time passed. Carol Berkin argues in *Revolutionary Mothers* that a “gender amnesia” surrounds the American Revolution. She writes that Abigail Adams, Betsey Ross, and Molly Pitcher are the only women frequently associated with the War for

¹³⁰ “Edenton, North Carolina, 25 October 1774,” *The Virginia Gazette*, 3 November 1774, postscript.

¹³¹ Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters*, 4-5.

Independence, yet history's understanding of these women is often skewed. Abigail Adams was not an early feminist, Betsey Ross might not have sewn the first American flag, and Molly Pitcher did not exist.¹³² If history forgot the efforts of high-class ladies, it is not surprising that the contributions – and, sometimes, the mere existence – of camp followers faded from America's collective memory.

History often excluded camp followers from the narrative of the American Revolution not merely because of their gender but because of their social class. As lower-class women in a formidable situation, camp followers did not have the privilege or, sometimes, the desire to adhere to social norms that catered to the middle- and upper-classes. Many camp women drank heavily, thieved, and appeared in public while pregnant.¹³³ According to *Private Yankee Doodle*, Mary Ludwig Hayes had no education, smoked, chewed tobacco, and “swore like a trooper.”¹³⁴ Thomas Anburey even recorded a humorous account of a camp woman who attacked a sentinel, snatched his firearm, and, “striding over the prostrate hero, in the exultation of triumph, profusely besprinkled him, not with Olympian dew, but that which is esteemed as emollient to the complexion – and ‘faith, something more natural.’”¹³⁵ By no means were camp followers ladylike. In *Revolutionary Mothers*, Carol Berkin writes that following the army made women's “patriotism suspect to some people who believed that by entering the camps these women displayed neither public nor private virtue,” otherwise defined as chastity and self-sacrifice. Their aforementioned characteristics make this assumption seem accurate. However, while

¹³² Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, xi.

¹³³ Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, 53.

¹³⁴ Martin, *Private Yankee Doodle*, 133.

¹³⁵ Anburey, *Travels through the Interior Parts of America*, 48-49.

Berkin notes that some camp followers preferred to disregard social and sexual feminine standards and act selfishly, others were upstanding women forced into an environment that did not allow them to be ladylike. She explains that respectable wives lost their sense of chastity because their situation forced them “to conduct married life in the open but crowded conditions of camp.” Berkin also argues that, although some camp followers put their own needs before their country’s needs, others possessed strong patriotic sentiment; they believed they greatly sacrificed for the American cause by relinquishing their more stable domestic lives and allowing their financial providers to join the army. Thus, they could not adhere to eighteenth-century feminine norms because of their socioeconomic positions and, consequently, did not garner respect.¹³⁶

Because contemporaries viewed these “unfeminine” camp followers in such a negative light, modern historians rarely give them much academic consideration. Like contemporaries, many historians dismiss camp women as whores and confine them to the footnotes of history.¹³⁷ Part of this opinion stems from the dark shadow that prostitution cast on all camp women. Although, as mentioned, the number of prostitutes among Continental camp followers was small, contemporaries hyper-fixated on their presence and assumed that the problem was far worse than it actually was. These views survived the test of time and affected modern historiography, causing scholars to overlook the importance of camp followers because of implicit bias in nearly all primary sources about them.

Another reason most academic works neglect the contributions of camp followers comes from the changes made to camp followers’ role with the army in subsequent

¹³⁶ Mayer, *Belonging to the Army*, 125.

¹³⁷ Mayer, *Belonging to the Army*, 5.

American wars. After the American Revolution, soldiers in later conflicts gradually learned to perform camp followers' chores themselves when women were not available or willing to do them. This led to military institutionalization of laundering, nursing, cooking, and other support tasks, and the need for camp followers sharply declined.¹³⁸

By the Civil War, most of the women in army camps truly were prostitutes. The greatest evidence of this comes from accounts of Union General Joseph Hooker, whose name inspired the term "hooker" as a reference to prostitutes. Charles Francis Adams Jr. recounted that "During the winter, when Hooker was in command . . . the Headquarters of the Army of the Potomac was a place where no self-respecting man like to go, and no decent woman could go. It was a combination of barroom and brothel."¹³⁹ Margaret Vining and Barton C. Hacker write in their article "From Camp Follower to Lady in Uniform" that traditional camp followers only persisted into the twentieth century where long-service professional armies were stationed, such as the French Foreign Legion in North Africa, the British Army in India, and the United States Army in the West. By this time, Vining and Hacker explain, ideals of women's caretaking and nurturing characteristics led most women to join the army as nurses.¹⁴⁰ Women's involvement as camp followers in the American Revolution faded from American memory, and their synonymy with prostitutes distorted their historical image and clouded their absolute necessity to the war.

¹³⁸ Mayer, *Belonging to the Army*, 138.

¹³⁹ Charles Francis Adams, *Charles Francis Adams, 1835-1915: An Autobiography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), 161.

¹⁴⁰ Margaret Vining and Barton C. Hacker, "From Camp Follower to Lady in Uniform: Women, Social Class, and Military Institutions before 1920," *Contemporary European History* 10, no. 3 (November 2001): 355.

CONCLUSION

A common defect in the pedagogy of American history is the erasure of undesirables. People like to forget the darker parts of their past, which leads to the exclusion of groups such as camp followers from the popular narrative of history. The mythology of the American Revolution prefers to remember its legendary leaders and the selfless colonists who took up arms under the common cause of liberty. It leaves little room for camp followers, whose wartime suffering and displeasing personas take the luster off of America's beginnings and show the American Revolution for the brutal war it really was. However, the stories of these women must be told to holistically understand this period in history.

Female camp followers provided vital services to the Continental Army. They washed soldiers' laundry, nursed the sick and wounded, sold much-needed merchandise, cooked meals, mended clothes, and more. Without their efforts, the underdeveloped army would have floundered. Thus, their services were integral to the success of the American Revolution and are therefore important to study.

Camp women also exemplify the hardships brought by the war. Poverty, family separation, and enemy occupation pushed them to follow the army. Once there, they faced malnutrition, they struggled to clothe themselves and their children, and they risked their lives on the battlefield. Camp followers show the harsh realities of the Revolutionary War, which are too often glossed over in favor of the higher ideals it symbolized; their experiences reveal the imperfect humanity, the ground-level history, and the everyday cast of characters behind America's origin story.

Despite camp followers' importance, both their contemporaries and many modern historians neglected their necessity to the cause of independence. Camp women, as a result of their poverty and wartime tribulations, could not adhere to eighteenth-century feminine standards, which demanded respectable ladies to be delicate and virtuous. This incited contemporary criticism, and the prevalence of negative primary sources on camp followers, combined with their declining role in subsequent wars, led to a severe shortage of academic works on the subject. Because most camp followers were illiterate, very few could recount their own experiences in the war and leave historical records to defend themselves from invalid accusations. Thus, their derogatory stereotype is all that survived the test of time.

Although societal views on women greatly progressed in the two centuries since the American Revolution, traditional notions of "ladylike" behavior still persist. Modern society continues to associate this term with delicacy, refinement, elegance, good manners, and good breeding even if it does not obligate women to meet these standards. Is it not time, then, to update our understanding of feminine ideals from the antiquated criteria of the eighteenth century? The example of camp followers, who sacrificed those traditional feminine ideals for the good of their families and the good of their country, should prompt one to reconsider the true requirements for a woman to be ladylike.

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