


BIOGRAPHY

Deborah Sampson Gannett

General George Washington had great difficulty raising enough recruits to fill the ranks of the Continental Army, but one healthy, young Massachusetts native was eager to sign up. The only problem was, she was a woman, and women could not serve as soldiers in colonial America.

As you read the passage below, think about all the ways that Deborah Sampson defied the social conventions of her times.

Deborah Sampson was descended from hardy and illustrious stock. The blood of Pilgrims John Alden, Miles Standish, and William Bradford flowed in her veins. Yet her father was unable to earn a living and deserted the family shortly after her birth in 1760. Unable to support her children, Deborah's mother had to send them to live with other families. Deborah changed homes frequently, and her troubled childhood had made her highly self-reliant. Finally, at age 10, she was bound out as a servant to a kindly church deacon.

There she performed such "unladylike" tasks as plowing fields, spreading fertilizer, and carpentry. She also learned to read and write and bullied the deacon's older boys into teaching her their lessons. She learned enough to become a teacher, but after a while, she craved more adventurous pursuits.

On May 20, 1782, Deborah Sampson embarked on a daring scheme. Dressed in men's clothing, she presented herself to the recruiting agent at Uxbridge, Massachusetts, and joined the Continental Army! She enlisted as Robert Shurtleff, which was her brother's name. The new recruit was outfitted in an infantry uniform—blue coat, white waistcoat, breeches, cocked hat, and boots, issued a musket, and was shipped to West Point in New York.

Deborah's unit was soon caught up in a skirmish with Tories and she received a musket-

ball wound in her thigh. Bleeding heavily, she was taken to a hospital. To avoid being found out as a woman, she convinced the doctors that she had only been grazed on the leg. Then, in secret, she extracted the musket ball herself and soon rejoined her unit. The following year, Deborah's unit was stationed in Philadelphia, where she contracted a deadly fever and was hospitalized. This time, her doctor discovered she was a woman, but agreed to keep her secret. He sent her to his own home to recover.

With the signing of the peace treaty ending the War for Independence, she was ordered back to West Point. There, Private Shurtleff was at last identified as Deborah Sampson. Her commander and comrades greeted the news with "a general surprise and, on the part of many, a total disbelief." Deborah later recounted with amusement. She received an honorable discharge, and back pay in the amount of 34 pounds, because she had "exhibited an extraordinary instance of female heroism by discharging the duties of a faithful gallant soldier."

In less than a year, she married Benjamin Gannet, with whom she had three children. Later in life, she made public appearances in uniform, performed exercises, and told of her remarkable adventures as a woman soldier in the Continental Army.

Questions to Think About

1. In what ways did Deborah Sampson Gannet show great courage in her life?
2. **Making Comparisons** Why was Deborah Sampson's army service even more dangerous than that of her male comrades?