

*A 'Gallantress' Gets Her Due:
The Earliest Published Notice of
Deborah Sampson*

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HER COUNTENANCE and voice,' said a family acquaintance, 'were feminine; but she conversed with such ease on the subject of theology, on political subjects, and military tactics, that her manner would seem to be masculine.' She was also five feet, seven inches tall, with an elongated face that was definitely not calculated to launch a thousand ships.¹ She was a Massachusetts country lass of estimable ancestry but modest prospects named Deborah Sampson (1760–1827). Though unquestionably not the first transvestite to serve in the American army—that entire subject awaits investigation—she was the first to become prominent by doing so. She served from May 1781 (or 1782, the sources are at odds) until November 1783, when she was mustered out of the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment of the Continental Line. As an infantryman she had been bloodied at Tarrytown and, if her later memory was accurate, had seen service at Yorktown during the surrender.

After peace, this combat veteran married a Massachusetts farmer named Benjamin Gannett and—with occasional forays over the countryside to deliver 'exhibitions,' or dramatic readings, about her military career—settled down in Sharon for the

¹ Hon. William Ellis, quoted in [Herman Mann], *The Female Review. Life of Deborah Sampson, the Female Soldier in the War of the Revolution*, ed. John Adams Vinton (Boston, 1866), p. xxxii; physical description on pp. 227–28n. First edition entitled *The Female Review: or, Memoirs of an American Young Lady* (Dedham, Mass., 1797).

rest of her long life. (The couple had three children, and in the 1840s *he* qualified for a Federal pension as the widower of a Revolutionary soldier.) In 1797, to make ends meet, this blonde, blue-eyed great-great-granddaughter of Gov. William Bradford told her story to a twenty-five-year-old Dedham printer and antiquary named Herman Mann, who got it printed for private subscription under a kind of nontitle, *The Female Review*. Despite the fact that the result rivalled in romanticism what Mason L. Weems would do to Peter Horry's manuscripts about Gen. Francis Marion, the little volume launched Deborah onto the backwaters, and eventually into the mainstream, of American annals of derring-do.

It is not the intent of the present writer to rehearse Deborah's story in detail, only its public inauguration; for by the 1970s several scholarly assemblages of data about her had seen the light of print.² Long before then, however, her reputation had been attracting those attributes—literary, cultural, and commercial—that tend to fasten upon a personality of authentic renown, however secondary that renown may be judged. Consider the following examples:

- 1797 Philip Freneau prints an ode in her honor in his *New York Time Piece*
- 1802 Isaiah Thomas, Jr., prints the tickets for 'Mrs. Gannet's [*sic*] Exhibition' at the Worcester courthouse³
- 1804 Paul Revere supports her pension application (1805) to the Congress in a letter to William Eustis, M.C.

² The three fullest—the two latter well illustrated—are Elizabeth Cometti, 'Sampson, Deborah,' in *Notable American Women, 1607-1950*, ed. Edward T. James et al., 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 3:227-28; Julia Ward Howe Stickley, 'The Records of Deborah Sampson Gannett, Woman Soldier of the Revolution,' *Prologue: The Journal of the National Archives* 4(1972):233-41; and Vera O. Laska, 'Deborah Sampson Gannett,' in her *Remember the Ladies: Outstanding Women of the American Revolution* ([Boston], 1976), pp. 61-94. Despite its title, this item is a study of three Massachusetts women only, the others being Abigail Adams and Mercy Warren. Part of Deborah's diary, from Mann's volume, is reprinted by Elizabeth Evans, comp., *Weathering the Storm: Women of the American Revolution* (New York, 1975), pp. 303-34.

³ A notice appears in Thomas's *Massachusetts Spy* (Worcester), July 21, 1802.

- 1841 Sophia Johnson, another woman soldier, cites Deborah in her narrative *The Friendless Orphan*⁴
- 1848– Mrs. Elizabeth F. Ellet glorifies Deborah in her
- 1850 pioneering feminist volumes, *The Women of the American Revolution*
- 1944 Liberty Ship *Deborah Gannett* is launched at Baltimore⁵
- 1948– Her pension application to the Massachusetts court (1818)
- 1949 is one of the documents exhibited on the travelling Freedom Train
- 1959 Three-act drama, *Portrait of Deborah*, by Charles Emery, has its debut at Rockland, Maine⁶
- 1970 The Soviets decide she was a Negress⁷
- 1975 The Plympton, Massachusetts, Historical Society honors her birth there with the issuance of color postcards dramatizing her role as soldier
- 1975– Her career is included in the National Archives exhibit
- 1976 'Her Infinite Variety: A 200-Year Record of American Women'

In his conscientious 1866 edition of the Herman Mann romance, John Adams Vinton, a Massachusetts genealogist and religious chronicler, asserted that Deborah's story 'began to be bruited abroad very soon after her discharge from the army,

⁴ [Sophia Johnson], *The Friendless Orphan. An Affecting Narrative of the Trials and Afflictions of Sophia Johnson* (New York, 1841), p. 23. There was a second edition at Pittsburgh, 1842.

⁵ Ruth Carson, 'Deborah Sampson: Female Soldier in America's War for Independence,' *Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine* 106(1972):258–62, 416.

⁶ Anon., 'Portrait of Deborah,' *ibid.* 93(1959):760.

⁷ United States Office of Education, *The American Revolution: Selections from Secondary School History Books of Other Nations*, comp. Robert D. Barendsen et al. (Washington, D.C., 1976), p. 12. This notion, of some vigor and endurance, originated with the misinterpretation of a passage in William C. Nell, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (Boston, 1855), p. 23. Among other authorities the Negro scholar Benjamin C. Quarles has repudiated the notion in his *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1961), p. xi. Notwithstanding, Dr. Marianna Davis of Benedict College, a Negro institution in Columbia, South Carolina, as conceiver and chief editor of a ten-volume compilation, *Contributions of Black Women in America, 1776–1976* (Newton, Mass., in progress), has elected to hold the question of Deborah's skin color as still moot.

before her marriage with Mr. Gannett.⁸ He reprinted one such source, but neglected to identify it, buried it at the back of his book, and wreaked all manner of alterations upon its text.⁹ We now rescue that source from its anonymity. It is *The Independent Gazette; or the New-York Journal Revived* for January 10, 1784 (p. 2, col. 1), appearing well before its subject's marriage to Gannett on April 7 that year.¹⁰ So, too, did a reprint in the *Boston Gazette* for February 9, 1784 (p. 3, col. 1), unnoticed by Vinton. Here follows the complete account as provided in the New York sheet. The only gross inaccuracy is Deborah's age, which at this juncture was twenty-four, not nineteen.

NEW-YORK,

January 10.

An extraordinary instance of virtue in a *female soldier*, has occurred lately in the American army, in the Massachusetts line, viz. a lively, comely young nymph, 19 years of age, dressed in man's apparel [*sic*] has been discovered; and what redounds to her honor, she has served in the character of a soldier for near three years undiscovered; during which time she displayed herself with activity, alertness, chastity and valour, having been in several skirmishes with the enemy, and received two wounds; a small shot remaining in her to this day, she was a remarkable vigilant soldier on her post, and always gained the admiration and applause of her officers; was never found in liquor, and always kept company with the most upright and temperate soldiers: For several months this gallantress served with credit as a waiter in a General officer's family;¹¹ a violent illness (when the troops were at Philadelphia) led to the discovery of her sex; she

⁸ *Female Review*, ed. Vinton, p. 229n.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 247-48.

¹⁰ Possibly owing to the feminist interest of publisher John Holt's widow, Elizabeth, who took over management of the journal with the issue of February 5, 1784. See Clarence S. Brigham, *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690-1820*, 2 vols. (Worcester, Mass., 1947), 1:651.

¹¹ This was Robert Paterson, whose biographer and great-grandson declares that Deborah functioned as no mere orderly ('waiter') but as aide-de-camp. See Thomas Egleston, *Life of John Paterson, Major General in the Revolution* (New York and London, 1898), pp. 236-40.

has since, been honorably discharged from the army with a reward, and sent to her connexions, who, it appears live to the Eastward of Boston, at a place called Munduncook. The cause of her personating a man, it is said, proceeded from the rigour of her parents, who exerted their prerogative, to induce her marriage with a young man she had conceived a great antipathy for, together with her being a remarkable heroine, and warmly attached to the cause of her country, in the service of which, it must be acknowledged, she gained reputation; and no doubt, will be noticed by the compilers of the history of our grand revolution. She passed by the name of Robert Shurtleiff,¹² while in the army, and was borne on the rolls of the regiment as such:—For particular reasons her real name is withheld, but the facts aforementioned are unquestionable and unembellished.

So there we have the primordial portrait of Deborah. It is hardly what one could term a speaking likeness, but it has cast a long shadow.¹³

¹² In the sources rendered variously as Shirtliff, Shurtleff, or Shurtleif. Among them is the 'Roll of Cap' Webbs Company of Light Infantry November 17th 1782,' a document uncovered by a student of Deborah's career, Jan L. Nelson, from among the Revolutionary War manuscripts at the American Antiquarian Society. Though curious, the surname is not unknown in the Bay State, viz., Nathaniel B. Shurtleff (1810-74), antiquarian, mayor of Boston, descended from William Shurtleff, who was in Plymouth as early as 1634 (*Dictionary of American Biography*).

¹³ Her likeness serving as frontispiece to *The Female Review* carries at bottom the inscription, 'Drawn by Joseph Stone Framingham 1797,' the original of which is in the Annmary Brown Memorial Museum, Providence, R.I.; artist otherwise unidentified. A stipple engraving therefrom, attributed to George Graham by the Worcester Art Museum, is available at the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Graham was a 'clever engraver' apparently working at Philadelphia as of 1797, according to Mantle Fielding, *Dictionary of American Painters, Sculptors & Engravers* (New York, 1945), p. 143. A full-length portrait allegedly of Deborah, in the uniform of the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, by one Knötel, is in the collections of the West Point, N.Y., Museum.

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