

## **Women Warriors: Heroines of the Revolution**

By

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*Scrape.* The faint sound broke the silence of that moonlit night in September 1777. A ladder poked through the window of the Priestly house. General Priestly was away fighting for American liberty, but his wife and twin children, Sally and Roger, were home.

Soon a Redcoat peered through their window. Suddenly, Mrs. Priestly's scream pierced the still night as she and Roger jumped up from where they had been crouching under the window. They pushed the ladder out of the window. With a crash and a groan, the Redcoat soldier hit the ground. Soon two of his comrades carried him back to camp. The Priestly family was safe – for now. But the previous day they had received money to take to the Continental Army, and the British knew it.

The next day, the British army under Generals Howe and Knyphausen set up camp in the Priestly yard. Mrs. Priestly had seen the troops marching toward her yard, so she hatched an elaborate plan to hide the money. She and the twins sewed the coins into pockets in strips of fabric and wrapped the strips around their waists.

When Mrs. Priestly was called to appear before General Howe, she headed for his tent with Sally and Roger, all three of them wearing the hidden money. Howe offered a bribe to Mrs. Priestly in exchange for relinquishing the money she had and betraying any other secrets she knew. When she refused, he told her and her children to leave their property immediately, taking nothing with them. Mrs. Priestly went to the lane behind her house where she

had hidden a wagon of provisions for the Continental Army. With smoke from their burning house rising behind them, Mrs. Priestly and her twins made their daring escape from the British to the Continental Army where they were reunited with General Priestly. The money and provisions they brought helped the army during their winter at Valley Forge. General Washington lent one of his mansions to the Priestlys until the war ended.

This is truly a great story of the Revolution. Yet it is only preserved in one book, and that book was out of print for many years.<sup>1</sup> In fact, aside from the famous stories of Molly Pitcher<sup>2</sup> and Deborah Sampson, the knowledge most of us have of the role of women in the Revolution is downright pitiful.

Women participated in the Revolution from its very beginning. On Sunday, February 26, 1775, the British General Gage sent Colonel Leslie to Salem to seize military stores there, but the people of Salem thwarted Gage's plan. Sarah Tarrant, a nurse, bravely instructed the British to inform Gage he had sent them on a fool's errand. When one of the soldiers pointed his gun at her, she dared him, "Fire if you have the courage, but I doubt it."<sup>3</sup>

Women were also involved in the battles of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775. A British seaman, probably John Crozier, tells us that the women also shot at the British in Lexington and Concord. One fired a blunderbuss from a window and was among the first to give their lives for our country.<sup>4</sup> Shortly after these battles, a patriot lady in Philadelphia wrote to a British officer in Boston who, as she put it, was a public enemy but a private friend. She explains how the ladies were sacrificing whatever expenses they could and learning new crafts to make clothing from American raw goods for their families. She says, "...I know this, that as free I can die but once, but as a slave I shall not be worthy of life. I have the pleasure to assure you that these are the sentiments of all my sister Americans."<sup>5</sup>

- . 1 Lucy Fitch Perkins, *The American Twins of the Revolution* (Emmaus, Pennsylvania: Salem Ridge Press, 2007). [L] [SEP]
- . 2 Henry Steele Commager and Richard B. Morris, *The Spirit of 'Seventy-Six: The Story of the American [L] [SEP] Revolution as Told by Participants* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1995) 714-715. [L] [SEP]
- . 3 Commager and Morris 65. [L] [SEP]
- . 4 Commager and Morris 78. [L] [SEP]
- . 5 Commager and Morris 94-96. [L] [SEP]

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Robert Keith tells us of Sarah Smith, a widow who assisted him and other American prisoners. Sarah used her own means to feed and clothe many prisoners in New York. One day, as she was comforting some prisoners, a guard heard her say that some day the roles might be reversed, and the current prisoners might be the guards. The guard shut her in jail, and when she got out, she didn't have much left for herself, let alone the prisoners. She collected alms from the townsfolk to help the prisoners.

When the mayor asked her by what authority she did this, she responded, "By the authority of the word of God." She gave the same answer to the general when he examined her. To stop Sarah's activities, the general exiled her from the area occupied by the British, allowing her to take nothing with her but her bed and clothing. Sarah sold her property in New York, and while traveling out of British lines, she delivered clothing and money to the prisoners.<sup>6</sup>

Women also helped spy for the Continental Army. Lydia Darragh, a Quaker lady in Philadelphia, and her family supplied intelligence to the army at Valley Forge. Most of the time Lydia herself collected the intelligence, and her family delivered it to the army.

However on December 2, 1777, the British held a meeting in her house and planned a surprise attack on General Washington. The next day, Lydia pretended to go to the mill for flour, but instead she told an American officer of the British plans.<sup>7</sup> Another lady, Anna Strong, used her laundry line to send signals for American spies.<sup>8</sup>

In the spring of 1781, Rebecca Motte helped Lieutenant Colonel Lee in his Southern campaign. The British had fortified her mansion and were occupying it, so the Americans determined to burn it. When they apologized for having to do this, Rebecca smiled and offered them a better bow and arrows for setting on fire and shooting into the house.

. 6 Commager and Morris 853-854. [L] [SEP]

. 7 Kenneth A. Daigler, *Spies, Patriots, and Traitors: American Intelligence in the Revolutionary War* (Washington [L] [SEP] DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014) 140-141. [L] [SEP]

. 8 Daigler 184-185. [L] [SEP]

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When the British surrendered, Rebecca fed them and the Americans at the smaller house where she was living.<sup>9</sup> These are only a few of the stories of patriot women who helped during the Revolution. We could continue for hours with the stories of the Edenton Tea Party,<sup>10</sup> Sybil Ludington,<sup>11</sup> and Deborah Sampson.<sup>12</sup>

Although many women helped, time has erased the memory of many of their contributions to the war effort. Yet these inspirational stories are worth remembering. At the time of the Revolution, women did not have as many rights as they have today. Although the men were fighting for "no taxation without representation," these rights would not be extended to women for over a hundred years. Yet the women of the Revolution did many

things that were extraordinary considering their role in society during that time. Likely, some people told them that they could not fight, that they could not spy, and that they could not smuggle supplies; yet they did. These ladies remind us that even when our culture tells us that our goals are impossible for us, we can still try. They show us that even if people tell us we are too old or too young or our goals are too lofty, we can still overcome these obstacles. They teach us to use our gifts and talents to help our families and our country. These inspirational women show us that anyone can make a difference.

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- . 9 Commager and Morris 1179-1181. [L][SEP]
  - . 10 Wikipedia, "Edenton Tea Party," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edenton\\_Tea\\_Party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edenton_Tea_Party), (accessed December 24, [L][SEP]2019). [L][SEP]
  - . 11 William Lefkowitz, *Fight for Freedom: Exciting Stories of Real People* (Middletown, Connecticut: Weekly [L][SEP]Reader Books, 1976) 19-29. [L][SEP]
  - . 12 Lefkowitz 43-56. [L][SEP]

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