

9

LETTER ON BEHALF OF DEBORAH SAMPSON GANNETT

February 20, 1804

William Paine Esq
 Member of Congress
 Washington
 Dear Sir
 I have the honor to inform you, that I have received to your care a petition
 & remonstrance in favour of Mrs. Sampson for manufacturing
 of Cotton being a Slave, but a short distance from the
 plantation where she lived, I have been induced to enquire
 into her situation, and I have to inform you she quitted the Mills
 habit, and sold her property, for the more decent appearance
 of her own color, & dress, she has been married and become a
 Mother. I have not the pleasure to say that every one
 who without a trial can read about her, and it is not proper
 speak of her as a woman of handsome talents, good sense,
 a dutiful Wife, and an affectionate parent. It is not
 much to be said, that she has several Children, her husband is
 a good sort of a man, the of small farm in business, they own a
 few acres of good land which they cultivate, but they are very poor.
 She told me, she was so well that her health is not
 poorer of her being exposed when she was a Slave, she said
 that while in the Army, she was exposed.
 It is my duty to inform you of the former when we have
 of color, we have no objection, according to their condition
 when I heard her spoken of as a Slave, I found the case of
 a little, delicate female, who had a mind, sharp of penetration
 without a suspicion, & one of the most of her kind. She
 was and I was with her equally anxious to give a
 most, delicate, and amiable woman, whose education is
 called her to a better situation in life.
 I have no doubt your humanity will provide you to do all in your
 power to get her some relief, I think her case much more deserving

Courtesy Massachusetts Historical Society.



TRANSCRIPTION

William Eustis Esq
Member of Congress
Washington
Sir

Canton Feby 20 1804

Mrs Deborah Gannet of Sharon informes me, that she has inclosed to Your Care a petition to Congress in favour of Her. My works for Manufactureing of Copper, being at Canton, but a short distance from the Neighbourhood where she lives: I have been induced to enquire her situation, and Character, since she quitted the Male habit, and Soldiers uniform; for the more decent apparel of her own Sex; & Since she has been married and become a Mother. — Humanity, & Justice, obliges me to say, that every person with whom I have conversed about Her, and it is not a few, speak of Her as a woman of handsom talents, good Morals, a dutifull Wife and an affectionate parent. —She is now much out of health; She has several Children; her Husband is a good sort of a Man, 'tho of small force in business; they have a few acres of poor land which they cultivate, but they are really poor.

She told me, she had no doubt that her ill health is in consequence of her being exposed when She did a Soldiers duty; and that while in the Army, She was wounded.

We commonly form our Idea of the person whom we hear spoken off, whom we have never seen; according as their actions are described, when I heard her spoken off as a Soldier, I formed the Idea of a tall, Masculine female, who had a small share of understandg, without education, & one of the meanest of her Sex. — When I saw and discoursed with I was agreeably surpris'd to find a small, effeminate, and converseable Woman, whose education entitled her to a better situation in life.

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

I am Sir with esteem
& respect

Your humble Servant
Paul Revere

GLOSSARY

apparel	clothing
conversable	able to carry on a conversation
discoursed	had a conversation
effeminate	marked by qualities thought to be related more to women than men
Esq.	abbreviation for esquire, gentleman
habit	dress or costume
handsom	handsome, impressive
meanest	lowest moral value, most humble origins
petition	in this case, probably a letter

BACKGROUND

As the Revolutionary War was winding to a close, a twenty-one-year-old Massachusetts woman named Deborah Sampson set off on an amazing adventure. Dressed as a man in clothing she had secretly sewn for herself, she enlisted in the Continental Army as Robert Shurtliff. To lessen the chance that a recruiting agent might recognize her, Deborah traveled dozens of miles from Middleborough, a town in eastern Massachusetts where she had spent her youth working as a servant, to Worcester, near the center of the state. Prospective soldiers did not have to submit to a physical examination (during which doctors would certainly have discovered Deborah's secret!) or provide proof of age or identity, as they do today. Recruits were supposed to be male, over the age of sixteen, appear capable of walking many miles a day, meet a height requirement of around five feet three inches (Deborah was five feet seven and a half inches), and have a minimum of two opposing teeth for ripping open paper cartridges. Deborah seemed to meet all of these criteria. To see a picture of Deborah, search for her image on *www.google.com*. You will find many copies of an oval portrait with an eagle at the bottom. In 1797, Joseph Stone painted the original, which is now owned by the Rhode Island Historical Society.

Mustered into the army on May 20, 1782, Deborah served with honor for seventeen months. As a member of a light infantry unit in upstate New York, she participated in patrols, scouting missions, and skirmishes, then was promoted to the position of "waiter" (an orderly) for a General John Paterson and his staff. It appears that Deborah was shot at

least once in the chest or a leg. Deborah claimed to have dug out the bullet herself to avoid being examined by a doctor. During the summer of 1783, while stationed in Philadelphia, Deborah fell seriously ill, perhaps with measles. When an army surgeon examined the delirious soldier, the doctor had quite a surprise. Robert Shurtliff was not the nineteen-year-old boy he claimed to be but was, in fact, a woman. Perhaps because Deborah had served so valiantly, often volunteering for dangerous missions, the army did not punish her for her deception (as they had two other Massachusetts women, Ann Bailey and Anne Smith, who joined the army but were discovered before they saw active duty). On October 23, 1783, General Henry Knox honorably discharged Deborah at West Point. Deborah resumed her life as a female.

During the two decades that passed between her discharge and Revere's writing this letter, Deborah married a farmer named Benjamin Gannett who lived in Sharon, Massachusetts. With him she had three children, Earl (born in 1785), Polly (born in 1787), and Patience (born in 1790). In 1796 she and Benjamin adopted a baby, Susannah Shepard, whose mother had died in childbirth and whose father seems to have disappeared soon after his wife died. Life was hard for the Gannetts. Their farm was only forty-nine acres, one of the smallest in the community. When an idealistic young writer and editor named Herman Mann proposed that he collaborate with Deborah on an account of her military service, she readily accepted, hoping that income from a book would help her pay off her family's debts. The reminiscence, entitled *The Female Review*, was published in 1797. The book sold well and brought Deborah notoriety.

Still struggling to improve her financial circumstances, Deborah Gannett set off on a lecture tour in 1802, traveling from her home in Sharon, Massachusetts, to Boston, across Massachusetts to upstate New York, then down to Manhattan. Thousands flocked to hear Mrs. Gannett's astonishing tale, see her don a soldier's uniform, and expertly clean, load, and pretend to fire a musket. Mann wrote the speech Deborah repeated at each venue. Unfortunately, when he wrote both the book and Deborah's oration, Herman Mann invented entire episodes, claiming, for example, that Deborah fought in the battle of Yorktown and that Deborah had had a few romances while serving in the army. Mann's writing created even more misconceptions about Deborah's military career than Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "Paul Revere's Ride" did about Revere's expedition to Lexington.

Luckily for modern readers, scholar Alfred Young has written a well-researched biography of Deborah Sampson, *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier*. He carefully tracked down every shred of evidence that might provide a clue about Sampson's activities, before, during, and after the war. This book is an invaluable resource and separates the known facts of Sampson's life from the myths.

As he says in the letter, Paul Revere became acquainted with Mrs. Gannett after he established a copper-rolling business in the town next to Deborah's. Struck by her plight, Revere decided to write to their mutual congressman William Eustis in support of her pension application. Did Revere's letter help Deborah get the money she felt was due to

her? We will never know for certain. But we do know that Deborah finally got some of the money she had requested. In March 1805, the secretary of war approved Deborah's request and instructed the Massachusetts pension master to add her name to his list of disabled pensioners. Deborah received four dollars a month and back pay of forty-eight dollars for each of the two preceding years. While this may sound like a pittance to modern Americans, Alfred Young speculates that forty-eight dollars was probably more money than the Gannetts earned from their farm in a year.

Deborah's military pension did not solve her family's financial woes. In 1806, Deborah wrote a letter to Paul Revere asking for a loan of ten dollars. She noted that Revere had already done "ninety and nine good turns" for her. She blushed "at the thought that my . . . circumstances require that I should ask the hundredth." Revere may well have continued to provide financial assistance to Deborah until his death in 1818. Deborah outlived Revere by nine years, perishing in 1827 at the age of sixty-six after a long and debilitating illness. Both Deborah and her descendants attributed her chronic ill health to a musketball that had been lodged in her body since the Revolution.

SOURCE

Alfred Young, *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2004.

QUESTIONS

Focusing Questions

1. What arguments did Paul Revere make in his effort to convince William Eustis to give Deborah Sampson a soldier's pension?
2. Revere assures Eustis that although Deborah fought in the war, she does not act like a man but is instead feminine in both appearance and character. What attributes does Revere think an ideal woman should possess?

Research

1. Deborah enlisted in the army after the battle at Yorktown, in which the Americans decisively defeated the British. Although this was the last major battle of the Revolutionary War, Americans and British continued to fight until after Deborah was dismissed from the military. Describe what was happening in the war during the time Deborah served.
2. What other roles did women play in the Revolution? Choose one woman to write about. Here are some suggestions: historian and playwright Mercy Otis Warren, Boston shopkeeper Elizabeth Murray (to find out more about Murray read Patricia Cleary's fascinating book, *Elizabeth Murray: A Woman's Pursuit of Independence in Eighteenth-Century America*

or visit Cleary's educational website "The Elizabeth Murray Project," <http://back.acs.culb.edu:8080/emurray>), Abigail Adams, Mary Fish (whose story has been told by Joy Day Buel and Richard Buel in their book *The Way of Duty: A Woman and Her Family in Revolutionary America*), or education advocate Judith Sargent Murray.

Creative Writing

1. Pretend to be Deborah Sampson. Write your own letter to Eustis asking for a pension. How will you persuade him to give you the money you so desperately need?
2. Research daily life in the Continental Army toward the close of the Revolutionary War, then imagine that you are Deborah Sampson. Write a journal describing your experiences on military patrols and scouting missions in upstate New York.
3. Paul Revere and Deborah Sampson may have occasionally met in taverns to chat. Imagine one of their conversations, writing the dialogue as a scene in a play.