



## He (She) was a Combat Solider in the American Revolution

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Deborah Sampson | Massachusetts Historical Society

Meet Robert Shirtliff, an enlisted man, I mean woman, who served in the 4th Massachusetts Regiment beginning in May 1782. Keep in mind, this was an elite unit that had seen combat at Bunker Hill, Trenton, Princeton, Saratoga, and Monmouth.

Shirtliff's real name was Deborah Sampson. She was born in 1760 in Plympton, Massachusetts. Her father abandoned the family, and Deborah eventually was sent to live with Mary Prince Thatcher, who taught the youngster to read and write. But when the elderly lady died, Deborah became an indentured servant to the Jeremiah Thomas family in Middleborough, Massachusetts, until her 18th birthday. At that time, she became a teacher and accomplished woodworker and mechanical tradeswoman making baskets, milking stools, winter sleds, weather vanes, spools for thread, weaving quills, and pie crimpers, all of which she sold door to door.

Being nearly 6 feet tall (average height for women was 5 feet and men 5 feet 6 inches) and gifted with strength, stamina, and dexterity, she decided in January 1782 to rename herself "Robert Shirtliff" and join the Army. At first unsuccessful due to being recognized by the recruiter and some other locals, she was forced to travel to another town where the 4th Massachusetts happened to be recruiting, but only for those who met its unique criteria. In fact, this being an elite unit, Sampson's disguise was more likely to succeed, since no one would expect to find a woman among soldiers who were specially chosen for their above-average size and superior physical ability.



Deborah Sampson presenting a letter to George Washington | Library of Congress

Her first battle was on July 3, 1782, outside Tarrytown, New York, where she took two musket balls in her thigh. Not wanting to be found out, she removed one of the balls herself with a penknife and a sewing needle, but the other was too deep and she carried it for the rest of her life.

During the summer of 1783, she became sick, and Doctor Binney removed her clothes to treat her and discovered the cloth she used to bind her breasts. After her recovery, the doctor asked Sampson to deliver a note to an Army general and she assumed, correctly, that the note would reveal her gender. To her surprise, she was given a discharge and enough money to travel home.



Deborah Sampson's house in Middleboro, Massachusetts | Library of Congress

Deborah Sampson married Benjamin Gannett in 1785, and in 1792 she petitioned the state of Massachusetts for pay that the Army had withheld due to her gender. The legislature granted her request, and Gov. John Hancock signed its approval. But, not satisfied, she now wanted a Federal pension. Using her connection to befriend Paul Revere, they began the unbelievable work required to reach this goal. Why was this so difficult? No woman, at that time, had ever received a military pension from the U.S. government. Revere wrote to a congressman friend: "Humanity and justice obliges me to say, that every person with whom I have conversed about her, and it is not a few, speaks of her as a woman with handsome talents, good morals, a dutiful wife and an affectionate parent." On March 11, 1805, Congress approved the request.

In the meantime, Deborah began giving lectures about her wartime service. Having a flair for the dramatic, her performance started with her extolling on the virtues of traditional gender roles for woman, but toward the end of the presentation she left the stage, returned dressed in her Army uniform, and then performed a complicated and physically taxing military drill and ceremony routine.

One more twist to this extraordinary story!



The major of Sampson's unit, the 4th Massachusetts, was Lebbeus Ball, who had eight children. One of his daughters was born in 1765, Betsey, and she would marry Aaron Jerome in 1785. Their oldest grandson was Leonard Walter Jerome, later known as the "King of Wall Street" and the founder of the American Academy of Music. His home once stood on the corner of Madison Avenue and 26th Street in New York. On a trip to Paris, his daughter, Jennie, met the son of the Duke of Marlborough, Lord Randolph Churchill. And they married and had two sons—one was named Winston.



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