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Gender and Military Service

Abstract

During the American Revolution and the American Civil War, females were among the many who participated in battle. Many, instead of situating themselves among combat, decided to act as spies in order to show their patriotism for the war effort. These women proved to their male combatants that women were far more capable of a “man’s job” than what was initially thought. They broke away from the gendered mold of domesticity and changed the way in which women were seen. No longer simply fragile housewives who could only handle the duty of running a home and taking care of children, they were now seen as active contributors to the war effort.

Keywords: women in war, female spies, women in the civil war, gender roles in antebellum America

Throughout history, the role of gender has defined and essentially divided nations, countries, and even cultures. At times, women have been regarded as unfit and too sensitive to be able to do a man’s job, and this is especially true about women’s participation within the military. Because of this negative viewpoint, many women took necessary but controversial military roles during the American Revolution and the American Civil War. For such women who felt as though sitting at home and tending to the house was not enough during war time, it became a necessity for them to engage themselves in battle. Many women also found themselves alone during these times with the men all gone off to war. Because of this, war and military service was seen as an escape from a troubled or lonesome life, and a way to make a contribution and live a more meaningful life.

During the Antebellum period, there was an ideology known as the “Cult of Domesticity,” which served as an example in which womanhood should be conducted (Morehouse and Trodd, 33). This ideology basically stated that a woman should consider it a privilege to work in the home; it also helped to exclude women from citizenship and other rights during the time the government was shifting to a democracy (33). This ideology was an important reason why several women decided to join the fight or chose to serve as spies against the enemy. This slight change in women’s roles is not only seen during the Civil War times but also during the fight against the British during the American Revolution. Because of the roles that were forced upon women during the 18th and 19th centuries, many women wanted to break out of the confines of those proscribed roles and take up more traditionally

men's roles in the war effort. An example of this can be witnessed through the diary of Sarah Morgan Dawson, who wrote her personal feelings on such matters, "O! if I was only a man! Then I could don the breeches, and slay them with a will! If some few Southern women were in the ranks, they could set the men an example they would not blush to follow. Pshaw! there are no women here! We are all men!" (Dawson, 1). This statement by Dawson is very powerful, and it shows why many women disguised themselves to fight because it was the only true way for a woman to have her voice heard without being criticized. More evidence of these instances can be seen in the lives and circumstances of four significant women, all four who acted as either spies or secret soldiers in the American Revolution and the Civil War.

During the era of both the American Revolution and the Civil War, there were certain responsibilities and behaviors that a woman had to uphold within the home and in public. Women were treated as insubstantial human beings who could only handle doing housework or taking care of a child, but anything outside of such categories was not deemed possible for a woman to complete. This generalization had been around for centuries, and depending on what country or region of the United States a woman was from, those principles ran even deeper. "The gulf between the sexes gaped even wider in the South, where chivalric ideals required even greater delicacy on the part of women and gallantry in the part of men" (Morehouse and Trodd, 34). With such terms being limited among women, it was easy to see why several would go against these principles to join or aid in the war. Public opinion was also becoming a widespread idea among both centuries and how one upheld their image in public was very important, especially for women, "Further, since the late eighteenth century, women had been defined as the protectors of public virtue, via the mechanism of providing both selfless moral examples and wholesome home lives for their families" (34). Following the public feature that women were supposed to uphold, many found it easier to abandon such principles for the life of a soldier. This allowed them to finally see how it is to be like a man and act like a man, or rather be seen as a vital part of a man's job. Women of the time, those who fought, acted as nurses or kept things running back at home, put their blood, sweat, and tears into the war. In a memoir by Mary A. Livermore, she argues that women were just as patriotic toward war as men were.

The transition of the country from peace to tumult and waste of war was appalling and swift-but the regeneration of its women kept pace with it. They lopped off superfluities, retrenched in expenditures, became deaf to the calls of pleasure, and heeded not the mandates of fashion. The incoming patriotism of the hour swept them to the loftiest height of devotion, and they were eager to do, to bear, or to suffer, for the beloved country (1).

These women did not let fear cloud their judgment; they did what they felt was right. They aided the cause, no matter the costs, and their patriotism greatly showed through their hard determination. For many women, there were several reasons why they wanted to be a part of the war. Some wanted to be in support of the cause by acting as spies and some wanted to actually be in the action and fight; others followed their husbands, brothers, and fathers; they became bored and wanted adventure; many wanted to escape troubled family and marriages (Morehouse and Trodd, 25-26). Even though it was against the law for a woman to fight in the war, several women used such reasons to defy the law and join the war. "In fact, although women were not allowed to enlist on either army, approximately four hundred women on record defied the law and managed to become soldiers during the war. The actual number is likely higher" (25). There were several women who had many reasons as to why they wanted to be in the war, but among all of those reasons, the one that every woman had in common was to defy the domestic circumstances that held the majority of them down. Both wars gave such women the opportunity to become known in history as more than just housewives, and rather as brave and courageous women who challenged the law in order to fight for the cause.

During the era of the American Revolution, there were several women who went beyond the ideas of housework and childbearing that was expected of them. One such woman was named Anna Smith Strong, and she served a pivotal role in the Culper spy ring for the Patriots of the Continental Army (Kilmeade and Yaeger, 93). The Culper Spy ring was created by General George Washington in the area of Long Island, New York; Washington designated Benjamin Tallmadge as the spymaster who would appoint spies in Long Island under his command (38-40). After Tallmadge was selected as the spymaster, he chose Abraham Woodhull, who was a neighbor to Tallmadge, and Woodhull, in turn, chose Caleb Brewster, Robert Townsend, and Anna Smith Strong, the latter known as Agent 355 (41-93). During her time in the service, Anna Strong had several missions in which her help was critical to the operation of the spy ring, and because of her growing up in New York, she was an easy choice to be a part of the ring. "Since Anna and Selah were close friends with Caleb Brewster, and Brewster didn't want to make direct and frequent contact with Woodhull that might arouse suspicion...Captain Brewster would signal her when he unpredictably arrives at the shore and docked in one of the coves" (Casey, 78). There were several ways in which Strong and members of the spy ring would use signals to communicate, and there was a specific way for which Strong was known.

Anna used her clothesline as a signal to Abraham. To communicate which of the six coves on the shore housed Brewster, Anna hung a number of handkerchiefs: two handkerchiefs meant the second cove, and so on.

Abraham Woodhull was then able to connect with Captain Brewster to pass on the information. Brewster could then cross the Sound and deliver the information to dragoons (horse-mounted troops) assigned to Major Tallmadge, who was camped with Continental Army troops in various locations. Then a series of dragoons delivered the message to General Washington wherever he was then camped (Casey, 78). Strong had several different signals, and to normal individuals passing by, the way she lined her laundry was unknown to them to hold spy secrets. During the time of the Revolution, it was rare to find a woman such as Strong who was courageous and willing to defy the crown and stand with the side that, at the time, was seen as not having a chance at independence against the British.

In the American Revolution, there were several women who decided not to take the spy route but instead wanted to get in on the action and fight. One specific woman, Deborah Sampson, fought for the Continental Army disguised as a man (Casey, 136). While Sampson was in the war, she had to disguise herself in order for her to be able to actually fight. “She had bound her breasts, dressed as a man, and signed up as Robert Shurtliff. She served for three years, living every day and night alongside her fellow soldiers” (136). Throughout her life, Sampson was able to experience many hardships, in which those familiarities allowed her to be able to cope with war and have the determination to fight for the cause. Sampson was born in 1760 in Massachusetts into a family of five siblings. When she was five years old, her father abandoned the family and her mother was no longer able to take care of all of the children on her own (136). Because of this, Sampson was sent away to relatives at ten years old and was forced to become an indentured servant (136). This event is an important aspect in Sampson’s role in the American Revolution because it shows how she could have developed a spirit of fortitude and willpower. Following Sampson’s decision to enlist under the disguise of a man, she served in a historically important regiment for the Patriot cause. “She was one of fifty new recruits of the fourth Massachusetts Regiment of the Continental Army. This historic regiment was formed in April 1775, from twelve militia minutemen companies of Worcester County who had responded to the Lexington Alarm under Colonel Ebenezer Learned” (Freeman, 18). While in the regiment, Sampson was stationed in West Point for a year and a half and was a part of a patriotic group that thirsted for liberty (19). During her time in the war, Sampson encountered many times in which she was wounded, but one specific time was a close call on the discovery of her being female. Following a Tory assault on the regiment, a sergeant asked Sampson to help lead a mission against the enemy, with the mission ending with Sampson becoming injured and taken to a French hospital for help.

The Doctor sympathetically offered her a large glass of wine to serve as anesthetic. Then he wiped the blood from her head wound and disinfected it with rum. She did not flinch though stabs of fire ran through her head. He rubbed a soothing salve on the wound, then bandaged it...The surgeon asked, "You have other wounds?" "No," she lied...He suggested she go into an adjoining room and take off her bloody uniform. Reenergized by the wine, Deborah managed to stand up and limp into the room, closing the door behind her. She stepped out of her breeches so stiff with blood it seemed they could practically stand by themselves...She quickly selected a silver probe curved at one end, lint made of softened linen, a bandage and a jar of salve...Intoxicated by the wine, her nerves somewhat dulled, Deborah seized the silver probe, thrust it into the open wound in an effort to extricate the ball embedded about an inch into her thigh...her first two attempts failed. But on the third try, as she prayed to God for help, she twisted the ball out of resistant and fiery flesh (Freeman, 49-54).

This instance in which Sampson became hurt is very important in understanding the risks that many women had to take in order to fight. Because she did not want to reveal the truth, Sampson had to use drastic measures to ensure that she not only stayed alive but also did not expose her secret. So many women who decided to join the cause and defy the law had to use such measures, even when it seemed impossible. Deborah Sampson was an enduring woman who did not let wounds or injuries keep her from fighting for the liberty and freedom that she deserved. Just like Sampson, women in both the American Revolution and the Civil War felt as though their reason was just enough for them to break the ideologies set upon them since birth.

There are several women who proved to be influential among the Civil War, but few are as significant and important than the life and experiences of Loreta Velazquez. Loreta Velazquez was a great woman who truly embodied why a woman would go to war knowing that, at any time, she could potentially be caught and face certain death. Velazquez's story is so much different than other women of the time because of the way she grew up as well as the hardships she faced that would eventually lead her to join the war. While she was growing up, Velazquez always looked to Joan of Arc as her heroine because she showed her what a woman was capable of accomplishing in a world in which men were dominant (*Rebel*, transcript). Because of the way Velazquez was taught to have appropriate lady-like manners and to only act in certain proper ways, it is easy to see why Joan of Arc was an important figure within her life choices. This influence that Joan of Arc had on Velazquez was important in her wanting to fight in the war, but there were others circumstances that motivated her to do so.

Velazquez married a man named William, and they ended up having three children together, with the last infant dying soon after childbirth (*Rebel*, transcript). Soon after that, fever killed off her two remaining children, leaving only Velazquez and her husband (*Rebel*, transcript). It was not long after that when her husband was sent to war, “On the 8th of April he headed out and my heart went with him. It was not long after that I received the dispatch. A chill went through my spine as I read there had been a terrible accident. I arranged for William’s funeral and settled his affairs numb with shock. I was now alone in the world” (*Rebel*, transcript). Now that Velazquez had no one left, she abandoned the laws that were set upon her for being a woman and decided to fight for a cause that her husband ultimately died for. Not long after her husband’s passing, Velazquez joined the war effort wearing male clothes, “She donned the uniform and became Buford. ... In July 1861, Loreta would fight in the first major battle of the Civil War, Bull Run, also known as Manassas. What she thought would be a short skirmish, would turn into four, long years of bloody civil strife” (*Rebel*, transcript). Even though Velazquez was a remarkable female soldier figure during this time, there were several aspects about her that made her seem quite different than other women who fought. While Velazquez was under the disguise of a male soldier, she bought a slave.

After donning her outfit as Buford, Loreta also buys a slave named Bob. And Bob always struck me as a very important character in this narrative. Bob becomes part of the way Loreta Janeta Velazquez, a Cuban woman, passes as Harry T. Buford, a Confederate soldier. Here she is trying to have her own, expand her own boundaries of the possible while enslaving another human being...When Loreta makes him a comrade in arms, and really to the same level as a warrior as the white soldiers, and as herself, it’s really fascinating what she’s doing. She’s essentially humanizing the slaves (*Rebel*, transcript).

This situation in the story of Velazquez’s journey is unique because it essentially shows how both slaves and women at the time had some similarities. Even though slavery was much more a wicked and inhumane thing to do to any individual, regardless of their skin color or ethnic heritage, women were also deemed as unfit to own their own property or even vote at the time. For women, the only chance at even making it in life was to marry. Another interesting fact about Velazquez is that she was caught trying to impersonate a man, and instead of being tried for treason and facing death, she was given a new opportunity (Hutchison, 2). After being caught, Velazquez was turned into a spy for the Confederates, “After being wounded and having her gender revealed numerous times, Velazquez ‘resume[d] the garments of [her own] sex’ and worked as a spy, blockade-runner, and secret service agent...In addition to Harry T.

Buford, Velazquez passed as a Spanish officer, a white Northern woman, a Canadian woman, an English woman, a French Creole woman, and a Spanish woman” (2). This feat that Velazquez was able to accomplish was incredible compared to what other male soldiers were able to do. Because of Velazquez, one is able to see just how much women were capable of doing a “man’s job” that goes beyond just housework and childbearing. Loreta Velazquez and her determination and heart allows others to fully understand how women were degraded and expected to maintain certain standards during this era, and how many women decided to fight their way toward equality and some sort of equivalence.

Among the many military roles that some women secretly took during the era of the Civil War, one woman by the name of Pauline Cushman decided to assist the Union effort as a spy. Cushman publicly toasted southern President Jefferson Davis and the Confederates’ cause while actually working as a spy for the Union (Caravantes, 46-59). Cushman had actually been born Harriet Wood, and because she went on to become an actress, she changed her name to Pauline Cushman (46-59). Because of her background in acting, Cushman found it easy to infiltrate the Confederate enemy while acting as though she was for the Confederate cause. Cushman’s most infamous act in spying for the Union was, in fact, when she made the toast for Davis.

On the night of the proposal, Pauline stepped to the front of the stage in the middle of the performance. She raised the glass in her hand and shouted: “Here’s to Jeff Davis and the Southern Confederacy. May the South always maintain her honor and her rights!”...The theater company fired Pauline, and Union officials “arrested” her, holding her just long enough to fool the Confederates...Southerners believed in her loyalty to the South and told her about blockade running, counter spying, and other Southern operations behind Union lines. Pauline took all of the information straight to the Federal provost marshal (Caravantes, 46-59).

Cushman became a spy for the Union forces but eventually was found out by the Confederacy (Caravantes, 46-59). Cushman was sentenced to death by hanging, but luckily for her, the Confederate Army camp that she was being held in was taken over by Union forces, and then she was freed (46-59). This instance in which Cushman faced certain death is very important because it shows the outcome that many women faced when they decided to act in secrecy. Following the war, Cushman published a book and toured the country speaking on her experiences while acting as a spy (46-59). Pauline Cushman’s involvement in the Civil War is different than many other women’s experiences because she was public and in the spotlight throughout much of her journey.

During both the American Revolution and the American Civil War, there were several courageous women who resisted the laws and other practices that were hindering them from experiencing things that men were able to do. Many became soldiers and spies for both causes and were able to achieve remarkable triumphs. In the time of both wars, women were seen as substantially inferior to males. Women were not allowed to vote nor own their own property, and the only way to essentially see that they had a decent life was to get married. A majority of women were also seen as delicate individuals who needed to stay pure and wholesome in the eye of the public. Because of this outlook placed upon women of the time, many chose to disguise themselves as men and fight in the war or to become spies against the enemy. Such women in the American Revolution, like Anna Strong and Deborah Sampson, who both acted against the British and fought for the Continental Army, and those in the Civil War, like Loreta Velazquez and Pauline Cushman, who were fighting on opposite ends of the war. No matter who fought for which side, women soldiers, and spies are rarely discussed or mentioned in history. Thanks to such women who were brave enough to fight in both wars and to go against every stereotype and ideology that was cast upon them, the view of women as capable and extraordinary human beings would be forever changed. “When the Civil War came and shook up the social structure just enough, women came pouring out of their houses. They came pouring out of their farms, directly into the public arena. As if to say, we can make a difference, we will make a difference” (*Rebel*, transcript).

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