

9 Women Who Helped Win the American Revolution

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[Kyla Cathey](#)

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The men who led the American Revolution—George Washington, Sam and John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Ethan Allen, and countless others—are well-known. But a number of women aided them in securing a victory over the British. Women played vital roles in the Revolution, serving as soldiers, raising morale, and even spying on the enemy.

DEBORAH SAMSON // AMERICAN SOLDIER



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To learn more:

<http://www.americanrevolution.org/women/women38.php>

In 1783, a young soldier named Robert Shurtlieff took ill, just another man sickened by the “brain fever” outbreak sweeping through the troops stationed in Philadelphia at that time. After a short struggle with the illness, Shurtlieff appeared near death. A doctor checked the man’s pulse, then rested a hand on his chest to see if he was still breathing.

He was—and the doctor was in for a surprise. Shurtlieff (sometimes listed as Shurtleff) wasn’t a man at all, but a woman who had bound her chest and disguised herself to become a soldier.

Robert Shurtlieff had been invented three years earlier by [Deborah Sampson](#) (sometimes spelled Sampson), a 20-something girl recently freed from indenture on a farm. A dedicated patriot, she was determined to join the Continental Army, and enlisted in the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. Sampson took well to Army life. So well, in fact, that her fellow soldiers teased her for being unable to grow a beard by calling her “[Molly](#),” but apparently never suspected the truth behind the name. She was injured in battle several times, always refusing medical care for fear that her secret would be discovered.

When it finally was, the doctor who learned her true identity (and whose [niece was falling in love with "Robert"](#)), nursed her back to health and then sent Sampson with a letter for [General John Paterson](#), her superior. [Sampson](#) was not allowed to stay in the forces, but the Continental Army did arrange an honorable discharge and enough money to get her home.

Sampson wasn’t satisfied with this metaphorical pat on the head. She went on to lecture about her time in the Army, and demanded back pay for her service. She got it in 1792. And in 1805, Congress voted to grant her a pension as a war veteran. Most recently, she was declared Massachusetts’ official state heroine, with May 23 as her official day.

PRUDENCE CUMMINGS WRIGHT // MINUTEWOMAN

The women of Pepperell, Massachusetts were a patriotic bunch. When they learned of the Boston Tea Party, they burned their tea leaves on the town common.

So when Pepperell's men marched off to war, it's not surprising that the women decided to [form their own militia](#) to protect the remaining townspeople. Prudence "Prue" Cummings Wright, who had just lost two children, was elected the leader of "Mrs. David Wright's Guard."

The women wore their husbands' clothing and carried weapons ranging from muskets to farm tools. The militia had formed, in part, because Wright had heard her British-sympathizing brother talk to a friend about smuggling information from Canada to Boston. So, on the day the two were set to cross Pepperell, the militia met them at the one bridge the spies could cross.

The women confiscated their documents and held them prisoner overnight while their messages were forwarded to the Committee of Safety for review. The two men were [exiled from the area](#), and Wright's brother never returned.

SYBIL LUDINGTON // THE FEMALE PAUL REVERE



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On the evening April 26, 1777, Colonel Henry Ludington received bad news.

British forces led by Major General William Tryon had landed on the coast of Connecticut and marched to Danbury, where they destroyed Continental Army supplies. Colonel Ludington was being asked to gather his militia and march for Danbury, 25 miles away. However, Ludington also needed to stay at his farm to brief the men as they arrived and prepare for the march.

His eldest child, 16-year-old Sybil, [volunteered to rouse the militia](#). She rode out at 9 p.m. on the start of a 40-mile circuit, knocking on farm doors and shouting that the British were in Danbury. Each of the men she woke gathered nearby militiamen and headed for the Ludington homestead, where the colonel was waiting. Ludington rode through the night, waking dozens of her father's men. She had to [avoid bandits and British sympathizers](#) on her route, but she returned home safely. Most of Colonel Ludington's militia gathered and marched to Danbury. They were too late to save the town from British torches, but they did manage to harry the British soldiers all the way back to Long Island Sound.

LYDIA DARRAGH // UNDERCOVER PATRIOT

George Washington maintained a large spy network, including a number of agents in British-occupied Philadelphia. According to her descendants, one of these was Lydia Darragh, a Quaker woman whose home became a meeting place for British officers.

[Family legend](#) has it that she often hid in a closet adjoining the room the officers met in, then smuggled word of their plans to her son, who served in the Revolutionary forces. Sometimes she sewed the messages into button covers or hid them in needle books.

If the stories are true, her spying career saved the lives of thousands of Revolutionary soldiers, including General George Washington himself. Sometime in early December, British officers meeting in Darragh's home discussed information they'd received that the colonists, led by Washington, were in Whitemarsh. They would launch a surprise attack, they decided. Darragh overheard the plans, then concocted a lie that she needed to purchase flour from a mill outside the city. She was given a pass by the British, then headed straight for the Revolutionary leaders, where she passed the information to an officer in Washington's army.

Thanks to Darragh's intelligence, the colonists were prepared for the Redcoats and, after a few skirmishes, the British retreated back into Philadelphia. Unfortunately, historians have been unable to verify many of the family tales surrounding Darragh's espionage.

5. PATIENCE WRIGHT // SCULPTOR & SPY



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Patience Lovell Wright was born in the Colonies, on Long Island. She and her family later moved to Bordentown, New Jersey, where she married a Quaker farmer. However, he died in 1769, and while she was able to stay in her home, she wasn't able to inherit any of his other property. She began [sculpting in wax](#) to support herself.

Wright and her sister Rachel, who had also been widowed, opened waxworks houses in Manhattan and Philadelphia, but Wright wanted more. After meeting Jane Mecom, the sister of Benjamin Franklin, she traveled to London, where she quickly won over British high society with her artistic skills and plainspoken ways. She even had the opportunity to meet King George and Queen Charlotte.

Wright began gathering sensitive information during her London sculpting sessions and sent it back to patriot leaders in the Colonies, [supposedly encased in her wax sculptures](#). She also took the Colonies' case directly to the king and queen, finding a supporter in William Pitt.

Wright was a little too vocally supportive of the Colonies, however. Once open warfare broke out, the higher-ups of London society began distancing themselves from her, and she eventually retreated to Paris. She also [fell out of favor](#) with the Americans as well, and the Founding Fathers stopped responding to her letters. She returned to London after the war's end, on her way home to the newly founded United States. But she never made it back to America—she died in London a few days after a fall.

<http://mentalfloss.com/article/67905/9-women-who-helped-win-american-revolution>

6. NANYE'HI (NANCY WARD) // BELOVED WOMAN OF THE CHEROKEE



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Nanye'hi of the Cherokee dreamed of peace between her own people and the European settlers who were a growing population in the hills of eastern Tennessee, where she lived. She had seen regular violence throughout her life, due to battles between the Cherokee people and white settlers or other Native American nations.

In a battle against the Creeks, she earned the [title of Beloved Woman](#), giving her a leadership role among the Cherokee. When her husband was killed in the skirmish, she picked up his rifle and led a rout of the enemy. Among her duties as a Beloved Woman was watching over prisoners captured by the Cherokee in raids and warfare. This would become key to her ability to help the Americans during the Revolutionary War.

During the French and Indian War, the Cherokee sided with the British, and that didn't change when the Americans declared independence. The British took advantage of this, encouraging the Cherokee to attack American settlements. Some of the Cherokee were against warfare, but others, tired of the encroaching American settlers taking more of their land, were only [too happy to fight](#).

Historians aren't sure why Nanye'hi chose to side with the Americans. It may have been out of practicality—many Cherokee leaders wanted to drive the white settlers out, but Nanye'hi may have sought to keep things civil with their new, close neighbors, or worried about retaliation if the British lost. Regardless of her motives, whenever Nanye'hi learned of a coming Cherokee attack on the nearby settlers, she freed American prisoners so they might return home with warnings. One of these prisoners was [Lydia Bean](#), a woman rescued by Nanye'hi from being burned at the stake. While Bean was with the Cherokee, the two women reportedly traded skills such as making butter.

After the war, Nanye'hi helped to negotiate peace with the new United States, though she's believed to have later urged the Cherokee not to cede any more land to the Americans, and take up arms if necessary.

ESTHER DEBERDT REED // HOMEFRONT HEROINE



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On July 4, 1780, General George Washington received a letter from Esther DeBerdt Reed, whose husband knew the general. In the letter, she reported that she and the ladies of Philadelphia had [raised \\$300,000](#), and asked how it should be spent.

Reed had come to the Colonies with her widowed mother only 10 years earlier, but had quickly set out becoming active in the political and social life of Pennsylvania, eventually rising to the role of Pennsylvania's [First Lady](#). Reed and her husband had entertained notables among the American cause, including Washington himself. So when Reed learned that the soldiers in the Continental Army were hungry and in need of good, warm clothing, she decided [she would help](#).

She gathered other political women, and they went door to door in Philadelphia, asking for donations. While a good deal of the \$300,000 they collected was devalued paper currency, they also received coin and in-kind donations such as leather trousers. At Washington's urging, they spent the donations on linen cloth and set out to sew shirts.

Reed died suddenly of a fever in the fall of 1780, but her friend Sarah Franklin Bache, the daughter of Benjamin Franklin, took up the work. The women sewed 2000 shirts for Washington's men.

And that's not where Reed's story ended. She was also the author of an anonymously published broadsheet entitled "[Sentiments of an American Woman](#)." The treatise encouraged politically minded women to show their patriotism by offering material support to American soldiers, and inspired movements similar to the one in Philadelphia throughout the Colonies.

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AGENT 355 // HIDDEN DAUGHTER OF THE REVOLUTION

Agent 355 is one of the most mysterious figures of the American Revolution. After more than 200 years, her [identity is still unknown](#).

A member of the Culper spy ring, 355 reported to Abraham Woodhull, who went by the alias of Samuel Culper Sr. However, she may have been closer to his fictitious “son,” merchant Robert Townsend, a.k.a. Samuel Culper Jr. Agent 355 may have been a family member or maid in a well-regarded Loyalist family in New York City, which would have allowed her contact with high-ranking British officers.

It’s likely that she was someone particularly close to Major John Andre, who led the British intelligence efforts. The intelligence she passed to the Culper ring was detailed when Andre was in New York, and sparse when he was not.

Whoever she was, she helped to uncover American General [Benedict Arnold](#)’s plans to betray the Revolution, and Andre, his contact, was arrested by the colonists. The fort at West Point, which Arnold had schemed to turn over to the British, was saved. Andre was eventually hanged, but Arnold escaped capture and joined the British as planned.

This is where records become murky. According to one legend, Arnold turned over the names of several Patriot spies, including Agent 355. She was captured and held on a [British prison ship](#), where she died—though not before giving birth to a son, Robert Townsend Jr.

Because no one knows who she is, her fate can’t be confirmed. While a number of women were held on the prison ships and the Culper ring had several female members, [none can be definitively identified](#) as 355.

MARGARET CORBIN // MOLLY PITCHER



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During the Revolution, women followed along behind the armies on both sides. These camp followers, often the wives or female relatives of soldiers, did laundry, mended clothing, cooked and took on other chores in exchange for food and shelter. However, a few ventured out of the camps and onto the battlefield. Margaret Corbin [was one of them](#).

Corbin's husband handled ammunition for a cannon, and she assisted him. In the fall of 1776, they were stationed at Fort Mifflin, Pennsylvania when the fort was attacked by British troops. The man operating the cannon was killed, and Corbin's husband quickly took his place, with Corbin taking over the ammunition duties.

Then Corbin's husband was struck down by enemy fire and killed, too. Without a pause, Corbin manned the cannon, firing it until she was struck by [grapeshot](#) that mangled her chest and left arm.

In 1779, the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania awarded Corbin [a \\$30 stipend](#) in exchange for her service. They also recommended that the Board of War grant her a soldier's pension, and the board complied. The Continental Congress gave her a monthly stipend of half an active-duty soldier's pay. Corbin and Deborah Samson were the only women to receive [federal pensions](#) for their service in the Revolution.

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