

DEBORAH SAMPSON

By Pauline Moody

CHAPTER 7 of "Sharon, Massachusetts—A History."

Late in October 1783, a youthful figure in an army uniform sailed down the Hudson River in a sloop of war, took a packet to Providence, and then started to walk to Stoughton.

That figure was Deborah Sampson. At West Point she had just been honorably discharged from the 4th Massachusetts Regiment by General Henry Knox, and commended by her officers for her bravery and good conduct while serving some seventeen months as a foot soldier in the American Revolution under the name of Robert Shurtleiff.

Homeless, the sturdy Deborah headed for the Cape Cod cottage of her aunt Alice Waters and husband Zebulon in the Dry Pond section of Stoughton which was later annexed to Sharon. As the young woman strode along—she was almost twenty-three—she must have wondered how she would be received wherever she went. She had joined the army, leaving no clue for her mother and sisters and brothers in Plympton or for the Thomas family in Middleborough with whom she had lived eight years as an indentured servant.

Certainly it never entered the thoughts of the tall Deborah—she was five feet seven and one-half inches when the average height of men was five feet four and of women four feet nine—that in two hundred years she would be unique in United States history and a forerunner of something called Women's lib.

The story has come down that the Stoughton relatives accepted Deborah's statement she was her brother Ephraim (also a soldier in the Revolution) and soon she was working on their farm. The young woman knew all about farm work.

Born in Plympton, Massachusetts December 17, 1760—the year George III became King of England—Deborah was one of seven small children Jonathan Sampson, Jr. had deserted before going to sea. Although well-to-do Jonathan Sampson, Sr. had several daughters, there was only one son and his inheritance would have been sizeable had he not felt a brother-in-law was mismanaging his father's estate, begun to drink heavily, and then left Plympton. While old histories report Junior was lost at sea, there's evidence and some proof he lived in Maine long enough to have one and possibly two common-law wives.

Though Jonathan lacked courage and will power, he was, nevertheless the great-grandson of Miles Standish and of John Alden His wife, Deborah Bradford, was the great-granddaughter of Gov. William Bradford

Butter was only six cents a pound, meat twelve, and a whole cod four, yet without a helpmate Mrs. Sampson could not feed Deborah, Sylvia, Ephraim, Hannah, Jonathan, Elisha, and Nehemiah. She was forced to "scatter" some of them.

Deborah, rather plain in spite of her sparkling hazel eyes, fair skin, and blonde hair, lived with a cousin, Mistress Fuller, until that loving relative's sudden death.

Then shelter was provided by highly intelligent but elderly, ailing Madam Thacher, a minister's widow residing in Middleborough. By the time Deborah was ten, the patient required more care than the child could give her. Once again the little girl was homeless.

THE BOUND GIRL

Since child labor was accepted as a way of life in colonial times, there was nothing opprobrious in Mrs. Sampson's obtaining a permanent home for Deborah by binding her out until she became of age. The new home was in the Thomaston section of Middleborough with Farmer Thomas and his considerate wife. In their large household - there were ten sons - the bound girl was well fed and comfortably clothed.

The indentured girl helped Mrs. Thomas do household chores, make candles and soap, fill feather beds, and spin and weave. She thoroughly enjoyed outdoor life, however, and undoubtedly preferred working on the farm with the ten boys. She handled farm implements skillfully and could fashion baskets and other articles as needed. As Sharon poet (Mary) Josephine Folsom Lamprey wrote in *America's Woman Soldier, Deborah Sampson*:

In the field, of times, with the men she toiled,
And, though tanned her visage, her garments soiled
It was thus she gained the endurance great
Which her served so well in her future state.

Perhaps the girl couldn't be spared to go to school regularly; or Farmer Thomas may have agreed with the prevailing idea that women shouldn't be educated. But the plucky Deborah early formed a lifelong habit of solving seemingly unsolvable problems. She was determined to master the three R's or the time - reading, 'riting, and religion - and she did. Fortunately, her mother had taught her to read; Mistress Fuller and Madam Thacher had encouraged her to continue; and Rev, Sylvanus Conant, pastor of the local Congregational Church, had awarded her a few precious books for learning the Catechism of the Assembly of the Divines so well. Farmer Thomas gave her sheep and fowl with the understanding all profits were to be channeled into worthy causes, and she could have mastered "cyphering" by accounting for the profits. Although paper was in short supply, she managed to learn to write a good hand. Like Benjamin Franklin before her, each night she checked a list of the good and bad qualities she had expressed throughout the day.

After Deborah's indenture was completed, she was asked to teach in a schoolhouse two miles from the Thomas home. In spite of holding a pen peculiarly – possibly because of a felon on her finger, she drilled the pupils, especially the boys, in penmanship. She taught the girls to sew and knit. For teaching two summers she was paid \$12 00. Expert at spinning and weaving, she worked winters in Middleboro Homes, and also in Sproat Tavern.

FOOT SOLDIER

No one will ever know exactly what prompted Deborah Sampson to become a soldier. As a small child she must have heard again and again how war had affected her mother's people, the Bradfords. For instance, Governor Bradford's son William, commander of the Plymouth forces in King Philip's War, had received a musket ball in his flesh which he carried the remainder of his life (surely Deborah never dreamt she'd have a similar experience). Zebulon Waters of Stoughton, who married Deborah's aunt Alice Bradford, had helped remove the Acadians from Nova Scotia.

Simeon Sampson, cousin of Deborah's father, was already America's first naval captain; all ten Thomas sons had enlisted; and news could have reached Middleborough that Margaret Corbin and "Molly Pitcher" Hays had rendered emergency service in the Revolution by taking over their husbands' guns and fighting valiantly after the men were killed or disabled.

Not only was the soldier-to-be tall; she was also very masculine. When Mrs. Gardner Derry came to Sharon as a bride, her husband's grandmother told her she had known Deborah and could understand how she got away with being in the army. She had associated with the Thomas boys so long she was decidedly masculine in both mannerisms and appearance.

Deborah enlisted first in Middleborough as Timothy Thayer of Carver. The whole performance was more or less of a lark. She appropriated a suit of men's clothing - after which the owner vowed he'd never wear it again - signed up, received her bounty money, went to an ordinary (perhaps Sproat Tavern) and spent some of it for liquor. It was not until "Timothy" failed to join the departing recruits that an elderly lady, carding wool in the room where the enlistment had taken place, admitted she had noticed how strangely "he" held "his" pen, Only Deborah Sampson held a pen like that.

The culprit was excommunicated from her church because of her "unchristian" behavior in the tavern, The Thomases forgave her. The members of the Third Baptist Church were less tolerant. On coming to Middleborough, Deborah attended the Congregational Church. There she listened spellbound while the Declaration of Independence was read - it was read in every church and copied in the records of every town in the Commonwealth. After the death of the beloved pastor, Rev, Sylvanus Conant, a series of revivals attracted the girl to the Third Baptist Church, and she joined it in November 1780. Rev. Asa Hunt was the regular minister, but Rev. Noah Alden, great-grandson of John and Priscilla and a native of Middleborough, often came from Bellingham to exchange pulpits with him.

The young woman in men's clothing took herself out of Middleborough before she enlisted again. First she signed up on a privateer at anchor in New Bedford, but vanished as soon as she heard that the captain mistreated his men. Then she tramped for days, often over wretched roads and through sparsely populated areas, finally arriving weary and penniless In the Crimville section of Bellingham.

"I have a hunch," writes historian John Lundvall of Mendon, "that she came to be in Bellingham because she knew Rev. Noah Alden, and also to be with Baptist friends. This would give her a chance to prove her ability to conceal her sex and also to survey the area for a higher bounty in exchange for her services. Surely Rev. Alden knew who would pay the highest bounty around there - he had been around the countryside preaching. It seems he helped her in that manner and when she signed up in Bellingham, that he took her to Uxbridge where Noah Taft completed the deal."

John Adams Vinton explained in one of his excellent footnotes in the edition of *The Female Review* he edited and which was published in 1866:

The male population of every town, capable of bearing arms, was at that time divided into classes, and each class was obliged to furnish a soldier for the army. The class sometimes paid a very considerable bounty. Deborah enlisted, and was accepted, for a class in Uxbridge. Bellingham is separated from Uxbridge by the town of Mendon. The man who enlisted Deborah is called a speculator, because he withheld from her a part of the bounty- money to which she was entitled.

Signed up as Robert Shurtleiff to serve three years in the Continental army, Deborah received a bounty of sixty pounds and gave Noah Taft a receipt dated "Worcester, May 23, 1782." Soon Robert was one of some fifty recruits marching the long, dusty route from Worcester to West Point. There he was assigned to Captain George Webb's Company, in Colonel William Shepard's 4th Massachusetts Regiment, and General John Paterson's Brigade. Early in 1783 Colonel Shepard was promoted to Brigadier-General and Colonel Henry Jackson was given command of his unit.

The uniform issued the female soldier is described as consisting of "a blue coat lined with white, with white wings on the shoulders and cords on the arms and pockets, a white waistcoat, breeches or overhauls and stockings, with black straps about the knees; half boots, a black velvet stock, and a cap, with variegated cockade, on one side, a plume tipped with red on the other, and a white sash about the crown." She needed certainly her "endurance great" to carry, along with other things, a good firearm, bayonet, hatchet, cartridge box and cartridges, buck shot and leaden balls, flint and powder, jack-knife canteen, haversack, and blanket.

The Female Review: or, Memoirs of an American Young Lady by Herman Mann, a book about Deborah published in Dedham in 1797, contains glowing accounts of her action at Yorktown when Cornwallis surrendered in October 1781. And it's incredible that so many years of research - and numerous hassles and misunderstandings - passed before Jan Lewis Nelson recently thought of a way to determine whether or not Deborah was at Yorktown. In the Massachusetts State Archives Mrs. Nelson consulted the "Muster Roll of Captain George Webb's Company of Light Infantry in the 4th Mass. Regiment in the Service of the United States Commanded by William Shepard Esq. Col. From the first of February to the last of November 1781. Inclusion being 10 Months." Robert Shurtleiff's name is not on it. His name is on Captain Webb's muster roll made up in Worcester November 17, 1782.

Seemingly this is what happened. With the British occupying what is now New York City before and after Yorktown, the Infantry scouted in Westchester County to spy on the movements of the enemy. Inevitably there were skirmishes with Tories. When Deborah and her comrades came head on with Tory Colonel James De Lancy and his forces near Tappan Bay, between Sing Sing and Tarrytown, the patriots would have been routed had not Colonel Ebenezer Sproat and his 2nd Massachusetts Regiment come to their rescue. (Of course the Colonel did not recognize Deborah among the rescued although he had often seen her spinning in his father's tavern in Middleborough.)

Years afterward Deborah Sampson Gannett swore she was wounded at Tarrytown. She received a sabre slash in the head and a bullet - perhaps more than one - in her thigh. It has been reported that in a hospital she managed to keep the surgeon's attention on the sabre slash. After his departure she found a silver probe and extracted a bullet herself. There's also a legend she remained alone in the woods, removed a ball from her left leg with a penknife, and rested until able to rejoin her company. Prolonged suffering much later would indicate at least one shot never was removed.

The jig was up when the soldier's sex was discovered. Unpaid soldiers mutinied in Philadelphia and threatened Congress so drastically General Washington dispatched troops to protect them. Among those dispatched, Deborah had not been in Philadelphia long before she was in a hospital with a raging fever. She was unconscious when Dr. Barnabas Binney placed his hand over her heart and did not see him recoil with utter astonishment as he felt the binders about her breasts. The Doctor, a native of Boston, was so concerned about this girl from Massachusetts he is said to have had her removed to his home for her convalescence.

On her way back to West Point, Deborah was more terrified of what might be ahead of her because of her deception than she had been of gunfire. Her fears were groundless; she was not punished but given an honorable discharge.

BRIDE

During the Bicentennial it was discovered that a rather elegant two and a half story house on Bay Road was once the Cape Cod cottage to which Deborah came following her discharge from West Point. She had lived there a year when intentions of marriage were announced between Deborah Sampson of Stoughton and Benjamin Gannett, Jr., a farmer in Sharon. They were married in April 1785. Presumably they moved in with the groom's parents who lived in a small farmhouse Benjamin, Sr. had built after coming from East Bridgewater about 1750. It stood opposite the present junction of East and Billings Streets - at that time there was no Billings Street, only Billings Lane.

Earl Bradford, Mary, and Patience were born to the young Gannetts, and with them they reared orphaned Susanna Baker Shepard. With a growing family and post-war prices exorbitant, in 1792 the ever-resourceful Deborah petitioned the

Commonwealth of Massachusetts for back pay. Her petition stated, "Hitherton I have not received one farthing." She was awarded thirty-four pounds and commended for her heroism.

LECTURER

A decade later, ignoring the disapproval of her family and friends, the individual who never lacked ideas again trod what was then only a man's path. She appeared on public platforms in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New York. In doing her own thing she was perhaps the first American female to earn money as a public lecturer. At a time when many women couldn't read and counted on their fingers, she was her own business manager and press agent

Astonished readers of *The Columbian Centinel* learned that Mrs. Gannett, the American heroine of the Revolution, would perform in the Federal-Street Theatre in Boston March 20, 24, 27, and 29, 1802.

The ghost-written narrative was little more than an apology for renouncing household duties to fight for her country and neglected to mention the exhausting marches, the loss of her toenails after her feet were frozen, and the lonely hours on night duty, but Deborah delivered it clearly and flawlessly. Then, equipped in complete infantry uniform, the middle-aged woman went through the manual exercise so expertly "she could almost make the gun talk every time it came to the ground from her hand." The programs in Boston usually concluded with the singing of "God Save the Sixteen States."

The lecturer, having been successful in both Boston and Providence, left Sharon in July to exhibit in Worcester, Holden, Brookfield, Springfield, and Northampton, Massachusetts before performing in Albany, Schenectady, and Ballston Springs, New York. She kept a diary throughout her tour. In it she described traveling by chaise, in private carriages, "with the Mail," and once six days by wagon. Understandably, as the months passed and the mother continued her exhibitions, more and more entries in the diary were about fatigue and illness. At one point she wrote, "Only God knows how happy I shall be to see my Dear Children,"

Deborah Sampson Gannett also listed all but one of her lodgings. "At Sudbury one night. I forgot the Land Lord's name." If the traveler was a guest at Wayside (then the Red Horse Inn) the old Barroom is still much as she saw it. And she must have responded with a warm smile if she were told Dorothy Quincy spent a night at the Inn en route to Fairfield, Connecticut, to marry John Hancock. Hancock's bold signature graced the document awarding the ex-soldier the thirty-four pounds. Another matter of personal interest was that Dorothy was a sister of Edmund Quincy, Jr. whose third wife was Hannah Gannett, Deborah's sister-in-law.

At last the weary woman arrived in Lisle, New York. Along the way she had been a guest in Captain Webb's home in Holden; now in Lisle another of her former officers, Major General Paterson, his family, and the "negbourhood" entertained her for the entire month of November.

PENSIONER

Apparently the visit in Lisle was beneficial in more ways than one. For the next two years Judge Paterson was in the U.S. House of Representatives. It is thought that he, with the assistance of Massachusetts Congressman William Eustis, to whom Paul Revere wrote on Mrs. Gannett's behalf, was largely responsible for having the female soldier placed on the federal roll of invalid pensioners.

The first pension of four dollars a month, retroactive to January 1803, was increased to six dollars and forty cents. Years later, the invalid pension was relinquished for the eight dollars Congress voted for soldiers who had served continuously nine months or longer, and were in need of financial assistance.

Paul Revere purchased the site of the old powder mill in Canton and "established a plant for the manufacture of copper, bell metal, ship fastenings, etc." A receipted bill for charcoal he and his son bought Sept. 23, 1803, from Joseph Gannett, brother of Benjamin, Jr. is still in Sharon. It was left when Joseph, his wife, and their numerous progeny departed for Pompey, New York, in a covered wagon drawn by oxen,

In his saddlebags Revere may have brought Mrs. Gannett her money from the Boston office of the agent for paying pensions, Gossip, relayed from generation to generation, has it that the two met occasionally for a cup of cheer at Cobb's Tavern,

Deborah died April 29, 1827 in her son's home and was buried in Rock Ridge Cemetery,

The veterans' agent in Sharon has no record of a military funeral. Miss Marion K. Conant, former librarian of the Dedham Historical Society, did considerable research before reporting, "I have found no information about Deborah Sampson Gannett's funeral. The Village Register of May 3, 1827 did print an exceptionally long obituary but I can find no account of her funeral in that issue or later ones,"

Benjamin, described as "lacking initiative" and also as "very upright and hard-laboring," was saddled with staggering medical expenses for his wife. His own health was "broken by constant labor and watching with the one he so dearly loved, for he seems to have been entirely devoted to her." At the urging of concerned friends, the elderly farmer petitioned for his wife's pension. Congress, baffled by such an unprecedented request, hemmed and hawed so long that the announcement it had been granted reached Sharon after Benjamin was beside Deborah in Rock Ridge Cemetery. He died January 9, 1837. Years later Ripley, of Believe It or Not fame, drew a picture of a solemn Benjamin and gave it the caption "His Wife Went to War - He received a Widow's Pension."

By special act of Congress the amount due the widower was divided among Earl Bradford Gannett and his sisters Mary Gilbert (Mrs. Judson) and Patience Gay (Mrs. Seth).

A FINE NEW HOME

Earl Bradford Gannett married Mary Clark. Mary's home was near Wolomolopoag (or Billings) Pond, and deeds to her family's property were signed by an Indian chief. The Clark's ancestor Thomas arrived in Plymouth on the Anne in 1623, along with Barbara Thorne who succeeded her deceased sister as Mrs. Miles Standish, and widow Alice Southworth who became Governor Bradford's second wife.

Earl and his wife joined his parents and grandparents in the old farmhouse. There their first child, Mary, was born. According to notes left by another daughter, all the Gannetts in 1813 moved into Earl's newly constructed mansion at what is now 300 East Street. Built on land Benjamin, Jr. had purchased in 1786 and cleared - recently the deed was given to the Sharon Public Library by the Cowell family descended from Patience Gannett Gay - it was several rods north of the old home and on the other side of the street. Well-preserved and considerably modernized, today the house is diagonally across from the man-made pond created for the Sharon Fish and Game Club. Beside another pond, not visible from the highway, is a sign "Deborah Sampson's Spring."

Benjamin, Sr.'s farmhouse was sold to butchers Smith and French of Canton and moved there for a slaughterhouse. The door's tone was embedded in the wall skirting the front lawn of Earl's new home.

The mansion was none too large, Patience; Deborah; Rhoda; Warren; Earl, Jr.; Benjamin; Thomas; and Joseph Warren were born there. When their sister Mary was fourteen she began teaching in the East School, not far from Bay Road. She couldn't shield her brothers and sisters from their schoolmates' taunts about the soldier grandmother; she could give them deserved rewards of merit.

After the death of Earl's son Benjamin in 1901, a newspaper noted changes in the stately old house: the substitution of modern chimneys for those containing the great fireplaces, the present hip roof in place of the original gable, and the addition of a verandah. It did not mention that the brick ends had been replaced with clapboards.

Passing out of the Gannett family more than a century after it was built, the spacious dwelling had a series of owners in rapid succession. During prohibition, police were forced to shoot into it before they captured the bootlegger holed up there. And sometime in the course of those uneasy years, a fire destroyed the ell connecting the house and barn. The pantry was untouched and at ninety-five, the late Mrs. Edith Leonard Johnson, Deborah's great-great-granddaughter, relished memories of the molasses cookies kept in a jar behind the pantry door.

Young Daniel H. Arguimbau, the present owner, takes as much pride in the mansion as if he had been one of the children who bounced their toys on its low window sills. He is descended from Thomas Southworth, son of the widow who was the second wife of Governor Bradford.

RECOGNITION

The Town of Sharon voted in 1860 to "accept the report of the selectmen in laying out a road over the land of H. A. Lothrop & G. R. & W. R. Mann"--land donated by those gentlemen. Thus a lane became a street, and it was local historian Solomon Talbot who suggested it be named after Deborah Sampson. Occasionally the question is asked if land along that street was given to the soldier in addition to her pension. The National Archives reports that Deborah Sampson Gannett received no land from the government.

Historian Talbot had a memorable background of his own. On his mother's side he was descended from one of the three Hessian soldiers settled in Sharon. The founder of his father's family was a knight who fought in the Battle of Hastings. Also in that Battle was Albertus Greslet from whom Col. Richard Gridley was descended. Since the Sampson ancestry dates back to Ralph de St. Sampson, chaplain to William the Conqueror, the Talbot, Gridley, and Sampson forbears may have been acquainted. "I love my God, my country and my fellowman as myself" is on Gridley's tomb in the Canton Corner Cemetery. Disgrace is worse than death is the translation of the motto on the Sampson coat of arms.