

REVOLUTIONARY MOTHERS

WOMEN *in the* STRUGGLE *for*
AMERICA'S INDEPENDENCE



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CHAPTER NINE

“IT WAS I WHO DID IT”

Spies, Saboteurs, Couriers,
and Other Heroines



Like all wars, the American Revolution created opportunities for heroism by ordinary people. Farmers and shopkeepers, schoolteachers and servants—men whose daily life did not hint at the resourcefulness and bravery they discovered within themselves during the long home-front war. Much of this heroism was manifested on the battlefield, but this was not its only venue. Men like Paul Revere and Nathan Hale risked their lives and property as spies, couriers, and saboteurs, earning their place in our historical memory for acts of bravery and sacrifice for their chosen cause. What is less well known is that women and girls earned a place in the pantheon of heroes too.

Over the course of the war, teenage girls and middle-aged matrons left behind their household chores and ventured behind enemy lines, risked capture and arrest, and stood up to armed soldiers who entered their homes and shops. Many of their stories come down to us only through family tales, told and retold, exaggerated and embellished in the process, but with a kernel of truth

nevertheless. They have appeared on websites and in essays created by proud descendants who have access to diaries, letters, or other records of their ancestors. They have also appeared in the works of genealogists and town historians who scoured local archives and took oral histories from survivors of the war. And, since the 1970s, they have reappeared in the works of amateur historians whose imaginations have been captured by them. Finally, many have made their way into scholarly books and articles, where the many versions have been analyzed and evaluated. In every case, these stories survive because that kernel of truth found within them captures a wartime reality out of which myths are made.¹

These stories of Revolutionary War heroines reveal surprising humor and resourcefulness. In them, young girls chew and swallow documents rather than have them discovered by the enemy; middle-aged women listen at keyholes to spy on military planning sessions; and old women serve liquor to soldiers and rob them of their guns. To achieve their ends, these women often played on the gender expectations and stereotypes of their day, feigning innocence or employing charms and wiles to gain the trust of the enemy. At other times, they demonstrated the steely determination of mothers seeking to protect their families, of sisters devoted to brothers in uniform, and of wives who admired the political choices their husbands had made and embraced the political cause their husbands served. But wherever the war front moved—from New England to Charleston to the middle states, and back to the South once again—women became veterans of the struggle. The tales that follow are only a small sampling of their feats.

In the same year that Paul Revere and William Dawes made their fateful ride to call the men of Lexington and Concord "to arms!" a twenty-two-year-old Connecticut woman named Deborah Champion mounted a horse and rode toward Boston. She carried with her important dispatches for General George Washington, the commander in chief of the Continental Army. By any

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standard, Champion was an unlikely hero. Unlike Paul Revere, she had played no role in radical politics before the Revolution; she was neither a Continental soldier nor a member of the local militia. But when a young horseman rode into her yard and rushed into the house to confer with Deborah's father, Colonel Henry Champion, her adventure began. The intelligence the exhausted rider carried had to reach General Washington—and Deborah and her father believed she was the person to carry it.

The next morning, before it was truly light, Deborah Champion, accompanied by a family servant, Aristarchus, rode due north to the Massachusetts border. The route was not the quickest, but it was the safest, for the British were already at Providence, Rhode Island. Although the roads were rutted from recent rains, the two riders made good time, passing through Norwich, then up the valley of the Quinebaug River to Canterbury. Here they rested for an hour before pushing on toward Pomfret, passing fields left in the care of old men and women by farmers gone to war. Changing horses at her uncle's farm, Deborah determined to ride on through the night, the dispatches hidden in a small compartment of her saddlebags, under the food her mother had packed for the journey.

Just as dawn was breaking, she was stopped by a sentry and ordered to dismount. His intention was to take her to his commanding officer, but Deborah, thinking quickly, warned him that it was too early to disturb the sleep of his superior. The young redcoat hesitated, uncertain what to do. He looked again at his captive, whose hair and face were shrouded by a large hood. In the dim light, she seemed to be no more than an old woman, traveling with an old servant, no doubt on her way as she claimed to visit an ailing friend nearby. No need to bother the sleeping officer. Released, Deborah and Aristarchus rode on to Boston and delivered the papers into the hands of George Washington. The general, Deborah later reported to a friend, "was pleased to compliment me most highly as to what he was pleased to call the courage I had displayed and my patriotism."²

Far to the south, as the British besieged the South Carolina capital of Charleston in early 1776, Harriet Prudence Patterson Hall and three of her friends made their way past enemy soldiers surrounding the city. When the sentries stopped them, Hall explained that they were on their way to purchase medicine from a Charleston apothecary. What the redcoats saw gave them little reason to be suspicious: standing before them were four well-dressed matrons, on an errand that took them into the city. The British soldiers stepped aside, giving the women permission to pass. With that, Harriet Hall walked into Charleston, an important message for the American commander safely hidden inside her petticoat.³

Charleston was not the only city in peril in 1776. That year, New York fell, and it remained under British occupation for the rest of the war. Despite Washington's efforts to defend the city, the defeat of his raw recruits in the battle of Long Island and the battle of White Plains sent the Continental Army fleeing for its life across the Hudson River. Only a small number of artillery companies remained at Fort Washington, perched high above the river, at the northern tip of Manhattan. On November 16, this fort came under attack. Among those inside were John Corbin, an enlisted man, and his twenty-five-year-old wife, Margaret Cochran Corbin. When the assault began, John took his position as an assistant gunner, but soon had to take over the cannon when the gunner was killed. Margaret immediately stepped into John's place, helping her husband load the cannon until he too fell dead. Margaret had no time to grieve. She stepped again into John's place, loading and firing the cannon herself. Suddenly, she felt a searing pain as grapeshot struck her shoulder, chest, and jaw. Seeing Margaret fall, soldiers rushed to carry her away from the front line and placed her in the care of other camp followers who were tending the wounded.

When the Americans at Fort Washington surrendered, the British set the wounded soldiers free on parole. Margaret was among them. They were ferried across the river to Fort Lee, and from there Margaret was taken by wagon to Pennsylvania. In

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time, her jaw and chest lacerations healed, but Margaret Cochran Corbin never recovered the use of her left arm. In an unusual move, Congress acknowledged her military contribution and granted her "half the pay and allowances of a soldier in service." But if her veteran's pension sustained her, it could not ensure a happy ending to her story. After the war, Margaret moved to Highland Falls, New York. There she became a figure of scorn rather than admiration. When she died in 1800, few local citizens realized that the sharp-tongued, alcoholic woman known as "Dirty Kate" had taken "a soldier's part in the war for liberty."⁴

On a dark night in April 1777, a sixteen-year-old rider named Sybil Ludington sped along the rough roads of Putnam County, New York, stopping at farmhouse doors only long enough to rouse the men sleeping inside. Her father, Colonel Henry Ludington, had received word that his New York militia was needed in the defense of Danbury, Connecticut, and Sybil's mission was to deliver the call to arms. Because of her, the Putnam militia played a critical role in the Danbury battle. Although Governor William Tryon and his redcoats managed to destroy the arms depot at Danbury, the Ludington troops helped Generals Benedict Arnold and David Wooster drive the British from the town.⁵

By the fall of 1777, Philadelphia was in the hands of the British, and by December, Sir William Howe and his officers were enjoying a winter round of balls and banquets while General Washington and his men were temporarily encamped at nearby Whitemarsh. Howe had taken up residence on Second Street, in the elegant home of John Cadwalader, a neighbor of a quiet and unassuming Quaker couple, William and Lydia Darragh. Soon after Howe moved in, a young British major knocked on the Darraghs' door and demanded that their house, too, be turned over to British officers. Lydia Darragh pleaded with the officer to reconsider: she had two small children and the family had nowhere to go. A compromise was struck: the Darraghs could remain, but a room in their home was to be kept at the ready, in case Howe needed it for a military staff meeting.

On December 2, the British collected on Lydia's promise. An officer arrived, instructed Lydia to prepare candles for the meeting room, and then ordered the Darragh family to retire early. The officer would knock on Lydia's bedroom door, he explained, when the general and his staff had departed. It was obvious that something important was on the agenda—and, overcome with a "presentment of evil," Lydia decided to find out what it was. This was no idle curiosity on her part; as a supporter of the American cause, Lydia had already sent military intelligence to Washington's camp, using her fourteen-year-old son, John, as a courier to her oldest son, who was a lieutenant in the Continental Army. And so, despite the risk involved, she laid her plans for the evening. When the British had assembled, Lydia slipped silently down the stairs to the meeting room door and put her ear to the keyhole. Listening intently, she was able to overhear Howe and his officers. What she heard confirmed her worst fears: the British were planning an attack against Washington's camp on December 4.

As the meeting broke up, Lydia returned to her bed. Anxious not to arouse any suspicions, she pretended to be so deeply asleep that it took several sharp raps on her bedroom door to awaken her. Looking drowsy, she at last opened the door and said her goodnights to the British officer. Then Lydia lay down to think. It was one thing to know what Howe planned; it was another to figure out how to get that information to the Americans. The British did not allow free access in and out of the city, and anyone asking for a permit to travel to the countryside needed a good excuse. But before the night was over, Lydia believed she had come up with just the right ruse.

The following day, Lydia Darragh went to Howe's headquarters and requested a pass to go to the village of Frankford to purchase flour. The officer in charge saw a middle-aged matron, carrying an empty flour sack, anxious to provide bread for her family's table. What he did not see was a clever spy with top secret information hidden away within the folds of her dress. Permit in hand, Lydia set out on foot through the snow, to deliver the

news of the impending attack. When the British made their move on the Continental troops at Whitemarsh the following day, they found Washington and his men ready, armed, and waiting. That evening, Lydia Darragh had the satisfaction of knowing that the surprise attack had been no surprise at all.⁶

Not every daring woman was a daughter of liberty, of course. Some, like Ann Bates, were loyal supporters of the Crown. Before the war, Ann was a Philadelphia schoolteacher, but by 1778, she was one of General Henry Clinton's most effective spies. When the British evacuated Philadelphia in July 1778, Ann went with them, following her new husband, who was a soldier in His Majesty's army. Once she arrived in British-occupied New York, she was approached and asked to serve as a spy. Under the cover name of "Mrs. Barnes" Ann slipped into the Continental Army encampment at White Plains, New York, posing as one of the many female peddlers who populated every military camp. In this guise, she moved freely about the camp, for American officers, like their British counterparts, assumed that women knew too little about military equipment or military strategy to make effective intelligence reports. It was a reasonable assumption—in most cases. But not when it came to "Mrs. Barnes." This schoolteacher had an advantage few women enjoyed: a husband who repaired cannon, guns, and other weapons for the army. Ann's reports on cannons, men, and munitions were as thorough as most men's would be.

In addition to being more knowledgeable than a woman was assumed to be, Ann Bates was fearless. On one of her missions, when an inside contact in the American army failed to materialize, Ann refused to abandon her assignment. She managed to penetrate into the inner sanctum of Washington's headquarters, where, as she put it, "I had the Opportunity of going through their whole Army Remarking at the same time the strength & Situation of each Brigade, & the Number of Cannon with their Situation and Weight of Ball each Cannon was Charged with." In August 1778, Ann's intelligence about troop movements spurred

General Clinton to send reinforcements to Rhode Island. The Americans and the French paid a heavy price for their assumption that a woman peddler was no security risk: they were forced to retreat from Newport and Rhode Island remained in British hands.⁷

Many miles away, in early 1779, "the biggest, the tallest, the most imposing Negress" in the state of Georgia, known only as Mammy Kate, mounted a horse named Lightfoot and rode fifty miles to the British fort at Augusta. There, her master, Stephen Heard, was one of twenty-three patriots who had been captured by loyalist forces and imprisoned at Fort Cornwallis. Mammy Kate was determined to rescue Heard from certain execution. Leaving Lightfoot safely hidden outside of town, she acquired a large clothes basket and made her way on foot to the fort. She offered her services to the redcoats as a washerwoman, and soon had a thriving clientele of British officers who admired her skillful ironing of their ruffled shirts. Having ingratiated herself with the officers, she took the next step in her rescue plan: asking permission to do the prisoner Heard's laundry as well. Heard's jailers agreed. Twice a week for the next several weeks, Mammy Kate entered Heard's prison cell, delivering freshly laundered linens and leaving with a load of dirty ones in the basket on her head. One evening, as dusk was falling, Mammy Kate entered the prison cell and exited with her basket, balanced on her head as usual. But no dirty laundry filled the basket that evening: curled up inside was the diminutive Stephen Heard.

Once outside the city, Mammy Kate set her basket down, and she and Heard made their way quickly to where Lightfoot and a second horse, stolen by Kate from under the noses of the British stable guards, now waited. Heard, who went on to be governor of the state of Georgia, freed his rescuer and gave her a small tract of land and a new home. Although a free woman, Kate continued to work for the Heard family until her death.⁸

In 1780, the war was going badly for southern patriots. Charleston had fallen to the enemy in May and the defeated

American officers and soldiers inside the city had been taken prisoner. Loyalists and redcoats freely roamed the countryside, taking towns and strategic posts, almost at will. The rebellion, British commander Henry Clinton boasted, was over in South Carolina. But many of those who refused to renew oaths of allegiance to the king fled to North Carolina and from there began to harass the British troops whenever possible. The enemy responded with raids on patriot sympathizers, especially those suspected of hiding caches of ammunition or weapons for the guerrilla bands. In the spring of 1780, the backcountry home of Jane Black Thomas became one of their targets. Jane's husband, Colonel John Thomas, was miles away, fighting near Charleston, and only a small band of patriot soldiers had been assigned to protect the Thomas family and the much-needed military supplies buried in the yard. As 150 loyalists approached the Thomas property, the patriot soldiers gathered all the ammunition they could and rode off to hide it once again. This left Jane, her three daughters, her young son, and her son-in-law Josiah Culbertson to detain the loyalists long enough for the patriots to make good their escape. Josiah set up rifle slots all around the house; Jane and her children formed a bullet brigade, feeding bullets to Josiah at each rifle station. The ruse worked for a while, for the loyalists believed the house was filled with soldiers. But when the enemy finally decided to charge the house, Jane sprang into action. Brandishing a sword in her hands, she stood in front of her home, daring her attackers to enter. Stunned, and apparently intimidated by the threat of violence from a middle-aged matron, the loyalists withdrew. The ammunition saved by her exploits was later used by General Thomas Sumter at the battle of Hanging Rock.⁹

Jane Thomas's home was not the only hiding place for the South Carolina patriots' vital supply of ammunition in 1780. Other caches could be found in hollow trees or dry wells, and necessity often required that women be charged with their safekeeping. One of these women was Martha Bratton, whose husband was a leader of the guerrilla resistance. Martha was warned

that a detachment of loyalists was on the way to seize the supplies in her care. Knowing that she could not defend the cache, she decided on the next best thing: she would destroy it. Acting quickly, she laid down a train of powder from the cache to the spot near her home where she stood. As the loyalists rode into sight, she set fire to the powder train—and stood calmly through the explosion. When the infuriated commanding officer demanded to know where the man was who had destroyed his prize, Martha Bratton was said to have calmly replied: “It was I who did it.”¹⁰

Other southern women proved willing to destroy their own homes rather than allow a loyalist or British victory. In 1781, British troops had seized the home of Rebecca Brewton Motte and turned it into a fortification, adding a stockade and a ditch around it. That May, a patriot force laid siege to “Fort Motte,” hoping to drive the enemy from the area. When news came that the British were sending reinforcements from Camden, South Carolina, the Americans decided their only hope was to shoot flaming arrows at the roof of the Motte home, setting fire to it and forcing the soldiers inside to evacuate. Reluctantly, they explained their plan to Rebecca Motte, who had taken up residence in a house nearby. Motte did not hesitate; not only did she give them permission to destroy her home, she handed the officers a beautifully crafted bow and a bundle of arrows—and watched while her house went up in flames.¹¹

In the summer of 1781, the patriot prospects in the South remained dim. Yorktown was still in the future, and, for the moment, the army of General Nathanael Greene was in retreat before the British troops under Lord Rawdon. Hoping to turn the hunter into the hunted, Greene decided to send a message to General Thomas Sumter to join him in an attack on Rawdon’s army. But the countryside was filled with loyalists and no one could be found to carry the word from one general to the other. No man could be found, that is. But a young girl named Emily Geiger came forward to volunteer. Somewhat reluctantly, Greene

agreed. He not only entrusted a letter to Sumter to her safekeeping but also gave her the message verbally, in case she needed to destroy the written evidence.

Riding sidesaddle, Emily Geiger set off on the pretense of visiting her uncle several miles away. She stopped that evening at a farmhouse, where she was given supper and a room. Before she retired, she realized that her hosts were loyalists. In the middle of the night, she heard a rider dismount and ask if the farmer had seen a young girl pass by. As Emily feared, the farmer revealed her presence. Confident that he could get a good night’s sleep before taking Emily prisoner, the loyalist soldier settled in for the night. Emily saw her chance: she slipped out an open window, saddled her horse, and rode on through the night. Her luck ran out the next evening, however, when she was intercepted by a British scouting party. Since she was coming from the direction of Greene’s camp, the soldiers decided to detain her. Although they were eager to examine her for hidden documents, the men balked at performing the search of a young lady themselves. Instead they sent for a loyalist matron. Emily took advantage of the delay: she tore Greene’s letter into small pieces and ate them, one by one. The search revealed nothing. The scouts’ commanding officer apologized and, to make amends, provided Emily with an escort to her uncle’s home. From there, Emily made her way to Sumter’s camp, delivered the message verbally, and had the satisfaction of seeing Sumter’s men immediately head north to join General Greene at Orangeburgh.¹²

In October 1781, Lord Cornwallis surrendered to General George Washington at Yorktown. Fighting continued, however, for over a year, especially along the Pennsylvania border. Here, on September 12, 1782, some 250 Indians and 40 British soldiers laid siege to a small frontier outpost named Fort Henry. Inside the men and boys defending the fort ran dangerously low on ammunition. Their supplies were tantalizingly close, in a cabin about sixty yards from the southeastern corner of the fort, but anyone who dared cross the open space between the cabin and the fort

would be an easy target for the besiegers. To the amazement of British and Indian soldiers alike, the gates of the fort swung open around noontime, and a young girl ran toward the cabin. A few moments later, she re-emerged, carrying a large bundle wrapped in her apron. When they realized that gunpowder was inside that bundle, the Indians opened fire. With lightning speed, the girl reached the gate—and disappeared from view. The girl was Betsy Zane, and her daring allowed the Americans to hold off their attackers. The British and the Indians abandoned their attempt to seize Fort Henry the following day.¹³

The young girls and matrons, the schoolteachers and African American slaves, the wealthy widows and camp followers whose stories are preserved in local histories and family scrapbooks rather than scholarly tomes give evidence that life during the American Revolution was indeed, as the popular British song put it, "the world turned upside down." The war for independence allowed, and often propelled, these women to step out of their traditional female roles for the briefest of moments and to perform deeds that surprised them perhaps as much as they surprised others. When the war ended, however, these women returned to their kitchens and parlors, to nurseries and gardens—and to the anonymity their society considered appropriately feminine. The lives of the women whose stories are told in this chapter were comfortably unremarkable after the war. Lydia Darragh returned to the life of a Quaker matron. Emily Geiger married a planter and raised a family. Mammy Kate had nine children and was buried in an unmarked grave near Stephen Heard and his wife. Rebecca Motte never remarried, but she rebuilt the home she had helped destroy. Martha Bratton lived for many years after peace returned, a "notable housewife" on her husband's farm. Ann Bates sailed to England with her husband in 1781. When he later deserted her, she was given a small pension for her work as a

British spy. No reports on Deborah Champion, Sybil Ludington, or Betsy Zane can be found. In their return to ordinary lives and familiar gender roles, these women share a bond with the thousands of American soldiers who became, once again, farmers and farm laborers, planters and merchants, dock workers and shopkeepers when the war was over.