

TREND & Tradition

FURTHER READING

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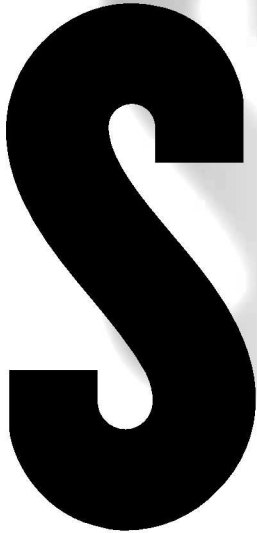
BUT NOT SOLDIERS

For some followers of the Continental Army,
campfires were home fires

BY HOLLY A. MAYER

RENDERING BY PERCY THOMAS





Sarah Osborn figured among the thousands of women and children who accompanied the Continental Army between its birth in 1775 and disbandment in late 1783. She and most of the other women followers assisted husbands, fathers, sons and brothers who served in the army. Before, during and after Yorktown, women with the army cooked, nursed and washed, among other chores. They bedded down in tents, cabins or barracks, and hopped on wagons or trudged with the troops.

Although a few women, such as Deborah Sampson, dressed as men and enlisted as soldiers, the overwhelming majority of women with the army were followers who ranked among what the Articles of War called the

“sutlers and retainers to a camp.” Sutlers were authorized camp peddlers, and retainers included contractors, volunteers, family members, servants and slaves. The Articles of War, passed by the Continental Congress in 1775 and again after independence in 1776, governed the conduct of the Continental Army, and made camp followers subject to orders like soldiers, although how they were disciplined depended on their roles and relationships.

How the Continental Army provided for them also depended on those relationships and roles. Elite women, such as Martha Washington, were nominally followers, but they were really visitors who arrived

when the army established winter garrisons and then went home when the troops marched out for campaigns. Other officers’ and soldiers’ families made wartime homes with the army. Some had to because they were refugees from enemy-occupied regions. Others needed the financial support of military members or wanted the financial opportunities that came with working for the army. As the war dragged on and men’s enlistments lengthened, the number of followers increased.

Sarah Osborn was one of that number.

She had been a servant, likely in her mid-20s, when she married Aaron Osborn in January 1780 in



DAVE DOODY

Albany, N.Y. He was doing some work for the blacksmith who employed her. According to her 1837 claim for a Revolutionary War widow's pension, she thought Aaron had completed his enlistment but, to her dismay, he had not. Aaron asked her to accompany him. She refused until his captain promised that her husband would be assigned to the commissary guard and she would be able to follow by horseback, wagon or, as it turned out, sleigh to West Point. Except for a brief return to Albany, Sarah Osborn remained with her husband and his company at West Point until Gen. George Washington's troops headed south in 1781. In her later pension applica-

tion, she said the only other women in the company at that time were the wives of Lt. Joseph Forman and Sgt. Simon Lamberson.

Osborn's recollection that there were three women in Capt. James Gregg's company in New York fits generalizations about the numbers and distribution of women with the army. Historians have approximated that there was one woman to every 30 to 35 men during the later years of the war, or according to another estimate, an average of two women with each company of Washington's main army by 1783.

Most regiments, and the companies that formed them, reflected the regional, ethnic and religious cultures ▶

A child portrays a camp follower on Colonial Williamsburg's Palace Green during a re-enactment of Gen. George Washington and Comte de Rochambeau's command of the allied armies in Williamsburg.

of their recruits. In early 1776, Moses Hazen's 2nd Canadian Regiment enlisted Canadians into the Revolution. Canada, however, remained within the British Empire, and the American army's retreat from the province of Quebec meant that the Canadians who stayed with the regiment were refugees. Congress permitted Hazen and his officers to recruit elsewhere to maintain the regiment, but a few companies retained a Catholic French Canadian core of soldiers and followers. Those companies appear to have had more followers than was usual, perhaps because they were refugees.

It was remarkable not only that Osborn rode — on wagon, horseback and boat during most of the journey — but that she could accompany the expedition at all.

A few of those refugee followers left pension application accounts like Sarah Osborn did. And these rare accounts record how follower sons grew up in camp and enlisted as soldiers before the end of the eight-year-long War for Independence. They also record how follower daughters married soldiers, set up households and bore babies in the military camps and garrisons. Some of the Catholics waited for a visit by a missionary priest to wed, whereas others had an officer in the regiment conduct the service. The widow Mary Cayeaux deposed in 1841 that she and Charlotte Chartier had both been in the retreat from Canada and that she had attended a marriage at the Schenectady barracks in February 1779. Cayeaux said that Lt. Alexander Ferriole had conducted that marriage and those of several of the Canadian refugees, including hers, that

winter. Protestant members of the regiment had the alternatives of chaplains and ministers in and out of camp.

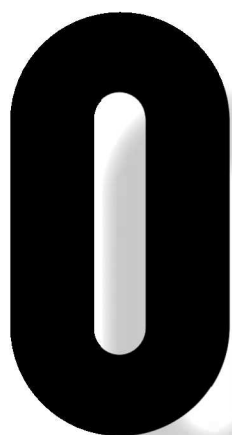
Most women married to officers and soldiers were not followers: They remained home. Others may have mirrored Theotist Paulint: After following her husband, Capt. Antoine Paulint into exile from Canada, she lived with him and their children in garrison barracks during the winter and then usually stayed there when he went out on "active service" in the summer. Some others, however, accompanied their husbands on the march.

Washington preferred that the women follow with the baggage instead of trekking alongside the ranks. He and other commanders often warned the followers to stay off the wagons. They did not want the image of marching troops tarnished by disorderly followers, nor did they want the horses or oxen pulling overburdened wagons. Yet there were occasions when the army allowed followers on transports: when doing so hastened the movement or, in the case of riding spare horses, released men for other duties. It was unusual but not unheard of to induce a woman to stay with her soldier husband by permitting her to ride, as Capt. Gregg did in Sarah Osborn's case.

Gregg permitted Osborn's riding not just in 1780 when her husband rejoined his company but also in 1781 when American and French forces headed for Virginia that August. It was remarkable not only that Osborn rode — on wagon, horseback and boat during most of the journey — but that she could accompany the expedition at all. Washington wanted to move fast and with stealth, so he recommended that women with the army remain in their present camps, disperse to other

ones or go elsewhere. They were to wait until the troops returned or they received orders to join them.

What generally guaranteed a woman a place and provision was her labor. If her presence served the army — if she was necessary to more than one soldier’s well-being — she could stay in camp or, as in this expedition, attend troops on the move.



On Aug. 3, 1781, general orders at West Point included the following: Women being fed, housed or provided firewood from the department or garrison were not to charge more than three pence

“hard” New York money or the equivalent in paper currency for washing a “common shirt,” or more than “four pence like money for a fine or ruffle shirt,” with the owner of said articles “furnishing the soap allowed by the public.” If a woman violated the order, she was to be drummed out of camp. Camp women were to work, and the army regulated the labor.

Laundress was the most common job for camp women. Commanders frequently mentioned washerwomen in orderly books as they determined what they were to do, how they were to do it and what they might get in return through rations and wages. By 1780, it may have been permissible for a company to provide women with rations based on the allotment of one woman

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Military Affairs		/RECORD OF BURIAL PLACE OF VETERAN		✓WAYNE COUNTY ✓	
NAME Benjamin, Sarah Mathews		DATE OF BIRTH 11/17/1745	DATE OF DEATH 4/20/1859		
VETERAN OF Revolutionary War		SERVED IN ARMY (<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>) NAVY (<input type="checkbox"/>) MARINE (<input type="checkbox"/>) CORPS (<input type="checkbox"/>)			
DATES OF SERVICE D.—Not sworn in:		ORGANIZATION (S) Washington's Army		RANK	
CEMETERY OR PLACE OF INTERMENT NAME Methodist Whites Valley		LOCATION Mt. Pleasant township, Wayne Co. Pa.			
LOCATION OF GRAVE IN CEMETERY SECTION LOT NO. RANGE GRAVE NO.		HEADSTONE (Marker) No GOVERNMENT () COUNTY () FAMILY ()			
INFORMATION GIVEN BY Warburton		REMARKS			
DATE 8/24/1936					
After being recorded in the County Veteran's Grave Registration Record This card is to be sent to THE ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, for final Record.					

Recalling the British Surrender

Military records show Sarah Osborn, under the surname of her second husband and with a debatable date of birth, was identified as a dependent of a Revolutionary War veteran.

Deponent stood on one side of the road and the American officers upon the other side when the British officers came out of the town and rode up to the American officers and delivered up [their swords, which the deponent] thinks were returned again, and the British officers rode right on before the army, who marched out beating and playing a melancholy

tune, their drums covered with black handkerchiefs and their fifes with black ribbands tied around them, into an old field and there grounded their arms and then returned into town again to await their destiny. Deponent recollects seeing a great many American officers, some on horseback and some on foot, but cannot call them all by name. Washington,

Lafayette, and (James) Clinton were among the number. The British general at the head of the army was a large, portly man, full face, and the tears rolled down his cheeks as he passed along. She does not recollect his name, but it was not Cornwallis.

Deposition of Sarah Osborn in an application for a Revolutionary War widow's pension.

washing for 10 men. Such women and others not on the ration rolls also supported themselves and their families by charging for each piece they washed. As overcharging was common, commanders established prices based on whether the customer or laundress provided the soap and the kind of item washed.

Laundry service was essential not just to the appearance, but also to the hygiene of the troops. Another essential health-related task was nursing, which included more cleaning chores along with tending to the sick and ▶

wounded. Although the army often had soldiers serve as nurses, it much preferred to hire women and men, whether in camp or from the local area, to serve in its hospitals. If it could not hire enough, it drafted camp women for the duty.

A few women served within senior officers' households, including those of Generals Washington, Henry Knox and Benedict Arnold. Some of these servants were soldiers' wives hired for the duty and others were slaves. These women cleaned, mended, laundered and in some cases cooked. As soldiers often formed messes — groups that pooled their rations and cooked and ate together — women were not often officially employed as cooks, though many did take on the job.

Sarah Osborn commonly sewed and washed for her husband and his fellow soldiers, but she also cooked and baked. When the allied armies paused near Philadelphia at the beginning of September, Osborn and the two other wives, joined by “a colored woman by the name of Letta,” baked bread. Then they continued southward, stopping at Williamsburg for two days before marching — the women walking, not riding — to Yorktown.

Osborn and the other women busied themselves with cooking, mending and washing at the back of the American tents. As the men entrenched and the artillery roared those October days and nights, Osborn carried pots of coffee and buckets of beef and bread to the soldiers. She once met Washington as she did so, and he asked whether she feared the cannonballs. She answered that “the bullets would not cheat the gallows.” It was the rough humor of revolutionaries who knew that if they lost, they might



be executed as traitors. More seriously, she added, “It would not do for the men to fight and starve too.”

When the drums beat the British surrender, she was again carrying provisions. She carried out the task amid all the excitement so that “four of the soldiers whom she was in the habit of cooking for ate their breakfasts.”

The war and camp follower chores did not end at Yorktown.

The Osborns saw the end of the war in 1783 at New Windsor, N.Y., where Sarah had given birth to the first of their two children. She had soldiered as a camp follower for more than three years, and her life, like those of other camp women, had not been easy then, nor was it afterward. Aaron deserted her and, without first obtaining a divorce, married again. Sarah, in turn, wed another veteran. After Congress passed an act in 1836 offering benefits to qualified widows of Revolutionary War veterans, Sarah Osborn Benjamin applied on the basis that she was Osborn's legitimate widow and she had the story of her own service to prove it. In telling her story, she helped write the history of women with the Continental Army just as she — and other followers — aided that army during the war. ▼

The interpretation of camp followers is included in the program **Washington's Army Descends on Williamsburg**, Oct. 8 and 9 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. See colonialwilliamsburg.com for more details.