

# Deborah Sampson Gannett (1760 – 1827)

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## A Local Guide



**Sharon Public Library**  
11 North Main Street  
Sharon, MA 02067  
(781) 784-1578  
[sharonpubliclibrary.org](http://sharonpubliclibrary.org)

## About Deborah

Deborah Sampson was born on December 17, 1760 in Plympton, Massachusetts, to Jonathan Sampson, Jr. and Deborah Bradford, great-granddaughter of Governor William Bradford. Following Jonathan's abandonment of the family, his wife was left impoverished and was forced to send some of her children, including Deborah, to live with relatives.

Deborah lived first with a cousin, then was taken in by a minister's widow living in Middleborough until the widow's health failed. Deborah became an indentured servant to a farmer in Middleborough where she helped with household chores and worked outdoors. She remained there for eight years and then became a schoolteacher.

Deborah is described as being exceptionally tall, plain-looking, and masculine in appearance and mannerisms. She was intelligent, with a strong grasp of theology and politics. Following a failed attempt to enlist in Middleborough (where she was expelled by her Baptist congregation for dressing in men's clothing and trying to enlist as a soldier), in 1782 Deborah successfully enlisted in Bellingham under the name of Robert Shurtlieff, and was assigned to the 4<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Regiment. She saw action in New York, and narrowly escaped discovery when injured, by extracting a bullet from her own leg. She contracted brain fever in Philadelphia in 1783 and her identity as a woman was discovered by the attending physician, Dr. Barnabas Binney. He did not reveal her secret, but arranged for her honorable discharge in October 1783 at which time she was commended for her bravery and good conduct as a soldier. Now 23 years old, Deborah had served in the Army for 17 months.

Following her discharge, Deborah moved in with her aunt, Alice Walker, in a section of Stoughton later annexed to Sharon. She continued to dress as a man, passing herself off as her brother, Ephraim, who also had served as a soldier in the Revolutionary War. She met local farmer, Benjamin Gannett, whom she married in 1785. They moved into the Gannett family farmhouse in Sharon where they raised four children (three of their own plus a local orphan).

Faced with financial problems, Deborah became one of the first female lecturers in the United States, describing her military experiences to audiences throughout the Northeast. In 1792 she petitioned the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for back pay. She was awarded £34 and commended for heroism; the documentation bears the signature of John Hancock. In 1804, Paul Revere wrote a letter on Deborah's behalf to petition Congress for a pension and she was placed on the federal roll of invalid pensioners.

Deborah died on April 29, 1827 in her family home in Sharon at the age of 66. She is buried in Rock Ridge Cemetery. Following her death, Benjamin—in serious financial straits and poor health—petitioned Congress for Deborah's pension. Congress delayed the decision for this unprecedented request for so long that Benjamin had already died when he became the first man to be awarded pension benefits as a widower. By special Act of Congress, the pension benefits were awarded to Deborah's and Benjamin's natural children.

\*Circulating copy available

## Library Resources

### Works by Deborah

*An Address Delivered in 1802 in Various Towns in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New York*

[also available at archive.org]

*Diary of Deborah Sampson Gannett in 1802* [facsimile]

[also available at archive.org]

### Secondary Sources

*The Female Review: Life of Deborah Sampson, the Female Soldier in the War of Revolution* [1866]

[also available at archive.org]

*Deborah Sampson Gannett Dinner in the Town Hall, Sharon, Massachusetts, April 3, 1902* by Eugene Tappan [1902]

[also available at archive.org]

*The Story of Deborah Sampson Gannett: Woman Soldier of the Revolution* by Cindy Loomis [1975]

*Women's Liberation, c. 1781* by George V. Rogers [1975]

*Deborah Sampson, Soldier of the Revolution* by Harold W. Felton [1976]

\**Deborah Sampson Gannett (1760-1827), America's First Woman Soldier: A Source Booklet* by Eleanor F. Wachs [1990]

*Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier, Parts 1-4: The Westchester Connection* by Jane Keiter [2000]

*Our Deborah* by R.M. Teed-Sampson [?]

\*See also: *Sharon, Massachusetts: A History*, Chapter 7. Published by the Sharon American Revolution Bicentennial Committee, 1976; revised 2005 by the Sharon Historical Society [974.47 SHA]

### Vertical File

Related documents, correspondence, etc.

## **Digitized Resources**

Sharon Public Library ([www.sharonpubliclibrary.org](http://www.sharonpubliclibrary.org))  
Special Collections / Digitized Sharon History / Deborah Sampson (Samson)  
Collection

## **Biography**

\*Freeman, Lucy. *America's First Woman Warrior : The Courage of Deborah Sampson*. 1992

\*Moody, Pauline. *Massachusetts' Deborah Sampson*. 1975

\*Young, Alfred Fabian, Alfred. *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier*. 2004

## **Historical Fiction**

\*Komechak, Marilyn Gilbert. *Deborah Sampson: The Girl Who Went to War*. 2012.

\*Nelson, Jan Lewis. *The Memoir of a Female Soldier*. 2023.

## **Younger Reader Resources**

Beaulieu, Ed. *Deborah Sampson : The Special Soldier of the Revolutionary War*. 2014.

Burke, Rick. *Deborah Sampson*. 2003.

Cheney, Cora. *The Incredible Deborah; A Story Based on the life of Deborah Sampson*. 1967.

Klass, Sheila Solomon. *Soldier's Secret: The Story of Deborah Sampson*. 2009.

Murray, Laura K. *Deborah Sampson*. 2021.

Smith, Joseph K. *Faking It: The Story of Deborah Sampson, Revolutionary War Soldier*. 2010.