

Camp Followers

Camp followers in the Continental Army served a critical role in the day-to-day functions of the American revolutionary cause. By the winter of 1777, around two thousand women marched with American troops and worked as seamstresses, nurses, and cooks. In many cases, women who followed the army were widows, runaway servants, or those who faced poverty because of the war. The wives of high-ranking officers, including Martha Washington, also accompanied their husbands at winter encampments. Though they supported the operations of the military, camp followers were often disparaged for taking a share of the already meager resources of the Continental Army.

Camp followers contributed to the daily responsibilities of maintaining the army by performing traditionally domestic tasks. One such role was serving as washerwomen for enlisted men and officers, which was essential for hygiene and the prevention of communicable diseases among the encampments. While washing clothing was sometimes imposed on camp followers by company commanders to justify their rations, some women engaged in entrepreneurial laundry work and, if not regulated by the unit they accompanied, would charge as much as the market would bear for their services.

As large portions of the Continental Army became afflicted with debilitating diseases, General George Washington also recruited both within and outside the camps for women willing to serve as nurses. In 1777, Congress authorized nurses with the Continental Army to be paid eight dollars per month. Of the duties at the encampments, serving as nurses was particularly unpleasant and tending to the sick meant exposure to disease.

Camp followers, like enlisted men, were “on the strength” of the army and were issued wages and rations for their work. This was an occasional point of contention for the resource-scarce army. Still, according to one account of camp followers in New York, women retained as cooks received the same wages as men in that position.¹ In rare cases, women assumed combat roles equal to those of their husbands. Mary Ludwig Hayes (memorialized as “Molly Pitcher”), Margaret Corbin, and Anna Maria Lane are all examples of women who demonstrated their patriotism by joining men in battle.

The size of the Continental Army was an attractive harbor for women because it provided security, shelter, and food. Still, Washington was irritated with the influx of camp followers, asserting in his August 1777 general orders that “the multitude of women in particular, especially those who are pregnant, or have children, are a clog upon every movement.”² Washington’s commands often did not treat camp followers differently than other members of his ranks and he expressed a desire to acquaint women with “serjeants of the companys” to “communicate all orders of that nature to them.”³

Most camp followers represented a departure from the eighteenth-century lady Washington was familiar with among the Virginia gentry. The behavior of some women included stealing, ... and disobeying orders. In his wartime writing, Washington seemed perplexed by the lack of feminine virtue among women who had integrated themselves among the ranks of the army. During the summer of 1777, for instance, he repeatedly expressed his frustrations over camp followers disobeying his orders by riding in wagons during the army’s marches.⁴

The wives of enlisted men within the army also posed a morale problem for Washington. Though he expressed concern over limiting the number of rations for women in the winter of 1783, Washington recognized that if he did not give reasonable provisions to “the extra women in these Regiments” he risked losing “by Desertion- perhaps to the Enemy- some of the oldest and best Soldiers in the Service.”⁵ Later, Washington lamented that the number of women and children with the New York infantry regiments left him with the options of either circumventing the new ration system or driving the excess dependents out of camp. He believed the latter would have resulted in men abandoning the army to follow their families, so he directed that the camp followers could continue to draw rations.⁶ To Washington, camp followers seemed a necessary evil rather than a vital support of camp life.

Still, an important faction of camp followers were the wives of senior officers, such as Generals Nathanael Greene and Henry Knox. These women accompanied their husbands during periods of low military activity and improved morale during winter encampments. They also fulfilled social obligations by initiating formal and informal events: Catharine Greene sponsored a dance in March 1779, Elizabeth Hamilton served tea at the New Windsor headquarters in March of 1781, and Martha Washington hosted dinners given at the Hasbrouck House headquarters in Newburgh in 1782 and 1783. While these affairs served the symbolic function of lifting men’s spirits, they stood in stark contrast to the work of the majority of camp followers. Though sometimes considered by Washington as a hindrance on war efforts, women who accompanied the Continental Army served an important role in the daily operations of camp life.

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<https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/camp-followers/>

1. Holly Mayer, *Belonging to the Army: Camp Followers and Community during the American Revolution* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1996), 140.
2. [“General Orders, 4 August 1777,”](#) Founders Online, National Archives.
3. [“General Orders, 8 September 1782,”](#) Founders Online, National Archives.
4. “General Orders, 4 July 1777,” Founders Online, National Archives; [“General Orders, 27 August 1777,”](#) Founders Online, National Archives.
5. [“From George Washington to Robert Morris, 29 January 1783,”](#) Founders Online, National Archives.
6. [“From George Washington to Henry Knox, 8 March 1783,”](#) Founders Online, National Archives.