

TREND & Tradition

FURTHER READING

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‘Fighting as a Common Soldier’

Anna Maria Lane distinguished herself in battle and won a military pension • By Paul Aron

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL HOEWELER

A great many women followed the Continental Army, earning their rations by doing laundry and sometimes by cooking or nursing or sewing. A few took up arms, most famously (though probably apocryphally) Molly Pitcher, who supposedly took her husband’s place behind a cannon after he fell at the Battle of Monmouth in New Jersey in 1778. Others dressed in men’s clothes, and Deborah Sampson was perhaps the best known. She passed herself off as Robert Shurtleff

and fought in several battles.

Perhaps the most mysterious Revolutionary career of any woman was that of Anna Maria Lane.

This much we know: In 1808 the Virginia Assembly granted Lane a pension of \$100 a year for life because she “in the revolutionary war, in the garb, and with the courage of a soldier, performed extraordinary military services, and received a severe wound at the battle of Germantown.”

What were these “extraordinary services”? Historians don’t know. But \$100 was 2½ times the normal pension for veterans.

Historian Sandra Gioia Treadway has chronicled Lane’s life — to the extent possible, given the very limited documentation.

Lane was born about 1735, possibly in Connecticut or New Hampshire. Her husband, John, enlisted in the Continental Army in 1776. Anna Maria, like many impoverished women, may have followed John and taken on one of the traditional female roles of a “camp follower.”

Sometime before October 1777, when the Battle of Germantown took place, she put on men’s clothing, either with or without the knowledge of other soldiers.

Germantown is a few miles northwest of Philadelphia, which was under British control. George Washington’s forces attacked on the 4th. Poor communication and a thick fog caused great confusion, and some Continental troops fired on each other. A large stone house served as a British stronghold, and bloody hand-to-hand fighting took

place in the yard and hallways before the Patriots were forced to retreat.

“Was Anna Maria Lane one of these who entered the house, who picked up a fallen standard, who made a valiant final charge when others were retreating?” asked Colonial Williamsburg historian Joyce Henry in a 2010 podcast. “That’s my thought.”

Anna Maria was certainly among those injured. Whether doctors discovered she was a woman or whether she somehow managed to continue to disguise her gender remains unknown.

After the war, the Lanes moved to Virginia, where John joined the Virginia State Legion in 1782. A year later, when the legion disbanded, John became a member of the Public Guard and the family moved to Columbia, southeast of Charlottesville. There, at Point of Fork, laborers provided arms and clothing for the state’s militia. Anna Maria took on a more traditional role, earning extra money doing laundry.

By 1801, the arsenal at Point of Fork was moved to Richmond, where mostly disabled veterans were part of a guard garrison. Weapons were also produced and repaired at this location. John Lane, by then 75, may have assisted with other guardhouse duties. Anna Maria Lane, meanwhile, served as a nurse and received a small stipend at the recommendation of the city’s health officer, Dr. John H. Foushee, whose father, William Foushee, was a member of Gov. James Monroe’s council of state, the body that oversaw such decisions.

Anna Maria Lane’s deteriorating

health required her to stop working in 1804. Four years later, when the General Assembly reduced the size of the guard, John was discharged.

Aging and ill, the Lanes applied to the state of Virginia for a pension.

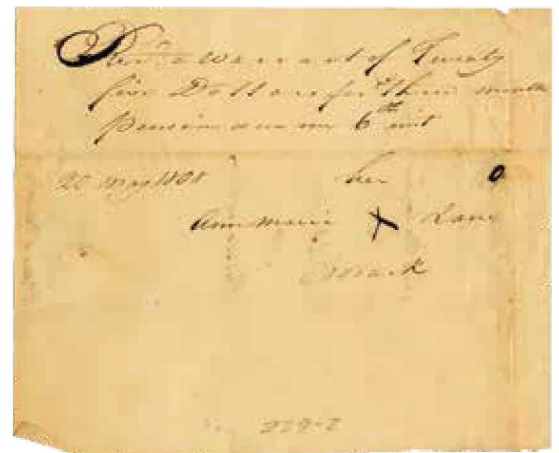
Virginia Gov. William Cabell championed the case of impoverished veterans. In his January 1808 message to the speaker of the House of Delegates, Cabell called for pensions for those “worn out in the public service.”

Cabell’s letter singled out Anna Maria Lane, who had been “disabled by a severe wound which she received while fighting as a common soldier, in one of our Revolutionary battles, from which she never has recovered, and perhaps never will recover.”

Members of the House of Delegates may have interviewed Lane, but no record has survived. Judging from the pension they awarded Lane, though, the legislators were impressed by what they heard. Anna Maria Lane received the pension until her death in 1810.

For Joyce Henry, the language used by the Virginia Assembly signaled Lane could very well have been one of the soldiers injured in the stone house. “To me, that highlights ... probably one of the bloodiest and heroic actions of the Battle of Germantown,” she said.

Concluded Treadway: “Although we now know virtually none of the details of Anna Maria Lane’s activities on the battlefield, the Virginia legislature’s unusually generous pension is solid testimony that they were real and important, and that they deserve to be remembered.” ▶



Anna Maria Lane was illiterate and signed for her pension by marking the receipt with an X.

War Women

A short list of women who were called to battle



MARGARET CORBIN

Margaret Corbin took the place of her soldier husband after he was killed during the battle of **Fort Washington** in New York. During the fighting, she suffered wounds in her arm and chest, disabling her for the rest of her life. She was an original member of the **Invalid Regiment** that Congress created in 1777 to care for disabled soldiers. Corbin was granted a stipend of \$30 and a lifelong pension of half of a soldier's pay in 1779. She was the first American woman to receive a disabled veteran's pension.

TYONAJANEGEN

After **Fort Schuyler** in New York was surrounded by British forces, an Oneida Indian woman named Tyonajagen was sent to nearby Patriots for help. She rode on horseback to **Fort Dayton**, getting past the British undetected, and along with her husband and son joined the forces to relieve the besieged fort. In the bloody **Battle of Oriskany**, the Patriots were ambushed and suffered heavy losses but continued to fight, sometimes hand to hand, for six hours before forcing British and Loyalist forces to retreat. Because of Tyonajagen's family's participation, a pro-British Iroquois war party burned their home to the ground.

DEBORAH SAMPSON

The idea of joining the army came to Deborah Sampson after she completed her time as an indentured servant. After dressing as a man and going undetected, she enlisted in the **Continental Army** in the spring of 1781 and served for 17 months under the name Robert Shurtleff. She was wounded in a 1782 battle near **Tarrytown, N.Y.**, but she treated herself and contin-

ued to fight and managed to escape detection. She took part in battles in **Yorktown**, and her unit was later sent to **Philadelphia** to quell a rebellion of American soldiers who were disgruntled over delays in receiving wages. She became ill there, and her gender eventually was discovered by a doctor. She received an honorable discharge in 1783.

ANN HENNIS TROTTER BAILEY

After her husband, Richard Trotter, was killed in a 1774 battle at **Point Pleasant** in Virginia – the culmination of Lord Dunmore's War – Ann Hennis Trotter began dressing in men's clothing, vowing to exact revenge. A staunch Patriot, she volunteered as a scout and messenger and often traveled between **Fort Savannah** and **Fort Randolph** – some 160 miles. As she moved from one recruiting station to the next, she urged volunteers to join the militia. She married a frontier scout named John Bailey in 1785, and three years later he began duty at **Fort Clendenin**, where conflicts between settlers and Native Americans were common. Ann Bailey rode the frontier, warning settlers of impending attacks. She is credited with helping to save a fort in what is now Charleston, W.Va., by replenishing its gunpowder supply.

SALLY ST. CLAIR

Sally St. Clair was a Creole woman who disguised herself as a man so she could serve in the **South Carolina Regiment**. Reportedly, she wanted to follow her lover into military service. She was killed in the **Battle of Savannah**, and it is said that she was protecting him. Her gender was not discovered until after her death. ♣