

Revolutionary Women

During the American Revolution, women played vital roles in sustaining the cause of liberty. Among them, the Irish-born and Irish-descended women stood out for their resilience, faith, and loyalty to the ideals of independence. Many women kept the home front secure through domestic labor and sacrifice. Other Irish-born and Irish-American women followed the Continental Army as nurses, cooks, seamstresses, and caregivers, often called “camp followers.” These women endured the same hardships as soldiers. Their courage and patriotism were equal to any soldier’s. George Washington, as Commander-in-Chief, recognized and deeply respected the contributions of women to the Revolutionary effort and even encouraged their presence, understanding that their work was essential to morale and survival. At Valley Forge (1777–1778), Irish-American women were among those who tended the sick and dying. Washington praised these women for their “service to the cause of liberty and humanity,” acknowledging that without their help, many soldiers would not have survived the winter.

Washington admired his soldiers and officers of Irish origin, acknowledging their bravery and devotion. The same spirit of service extended to Irish women, who supported the patriot cause both at home and on the battlefield. Washington’s army was sustained in part by the strength, industry, and patriotism of these women.

Some examples of the Irish and Irish-American women who demonstrated their bravery during the American Revolution include Margaret Corbin, Elizabeth Gilmore and her sister Ann. These women demonstrated their bravery on the battlefield as soldiers and nurses.

Margaret Cochran Corbin was born in 1751 to Irish emigrants on the frontier of western Pennsylvania. At the age of 21, she married John Corbin. He enlisted in the Pennsylvania Artillery. Margaret accompanied him to the war. John was killed at the Battle of Fort Washington at his cannon. Margaret took his place until she was seriously wounded. She is the first woman in American history to receive a military pension.

Elizabeth and Ann Gilmore emigrated from the North of Ireland as teenagers. The Gilmore Sisters were nurses at Valley Forge. General Horatio Gates the Continental Army informed Washington that “the sick suffered much for want of good female nurses.” Washington advocated for more nurses and Congress approved one nurse per ten patients and one matron assigned to oversee the care of 100 soldiers. In addition to serving as a nurse Elizabeth along with her husband John Berry were privates in the Continental Army.

The legacy of these women who served in the American Revolution lives on today with the many women of Irish heritage who have or are serving in all branches of the military as soldiers and nurses. The Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians remember and honor the Revolutionary Women and all women who have served in our military.