

X

Citizen Soldiers

For all its economic, political, and social dimensions (see Sec. XI-XIII), the revolutionary war was at base a military venture. Thus considerable attention must be paid to the engagements and campaigns that comprise the War for Independence (see Sec. IX). But in viewing the war one should not lose sight of the warriors, for in the end those who did battle are more important than the battles. After all, the outcome of the contest rested upon the shoulders of those who individually took up arms and collectively formed armies.

An estimated 10-12,000 Jersey men saw military service in the revolutionary war as members of either the Continental army, the state troops, the militia, or various special units. Hailing from all walks of life, they were truly citizen soldiers. The outbreak of warfare in Massachusetts in April 1775 transformed farmers and shopkeepers, craftsmen and laborers into infantrymen and artillerymen, fifers and drummers, bombardiers and dragoons, boatmen and teamsters. (See Sec. V, Docs. 6 and 12; Sec. VI, Doc. 4.) These poorly trained, ill-equipped, and meagerly paid troops, who usually had to provide their own arms and uniforms, stood in sharp contrast to the generally disciplined and resplendent professional soldiers who fought for the king. Having utter contempt for the tattered and bedraggled Continental lines, the inefficient and unpredictable state troops, and the more-condemned-than-commended militia, the British could scarcely comprehend what kept American armies in the field.

The New Jersey soldier, typical of his counterparts elsewhere, was motivated by hopes as well as fears—hopes of what might be achieved by taking up arms and fears of what might be lost by failing to do so. A crusade-like atmosphere marked the early days of the ideologically charged war as men put aside considerations of personal comfort and safety to pursue the cherished objectives of liberty and independence (Doc. 1). But as the war raged on, the

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willingness to fight stemmed increasingly from the will to survive, to protect homes and families from the dreaded enemy (Doc. 6). And with the passage of time, as patriotic fervor gave way to the realization that the war would be long and hard, much of the soldiery became hardened, even cynical. Officers competed for promotion (Doc. 9) and complained about inadequate compensation (Doc. 11), while the men in ranks became embittered by a host of grievances ranging from arrears in pay to excessively long tours of duty (Doc. 14). It became predictable, even in times of crisis, that many militiamen would desert or fail to turn out (Docs. 4 and 7); others shirked military service by paying small fines or providing substitutes. However, although some veterans would later wonder whether the new nation recognized or appreciated their sacrifices (Doc. 15) most men, whether chaplains (Doc. 2) or privates (Doc. 3), freemen or slaves (Doc. 16), for reasons known only to themselves stoically endured untold hardships (Doc. 12) and fought on.

Just as a sizable number of men who served in the army never fought, another group of "citizen-soldiers" contributed materially to the war effort without serving in the army—the women of New Jersey. Their contributions were legion. A ragtag, mixed bag of females known as "camp followers"—seamstresses and laundresses, wives and whores—accompanied armies on their marches. Most women, however, remained behind minding the home fires, tending the farms and shops, making clothing and equipment for the men in arms. When the occasion presented itself, they were able to shoulder muskets (Doc. 5) and man cannon (Doc. 10). One especially zealous female took up the pen and boldly suggested subtle ways in which her sisters could support the war effort (Doc. 8). More demure but no less determined, a group of Trenton ladies organized a statewide relief society (Doc. 13). All in all it is hard to conceive how the martial enterprises in the state could have been maintained without the encouragement and assistance of Jersey women.

Americans were able to endure nearly eight years of warfare against invading troops and home-grown Loyalists precisely because they were "citizen-soldiers"—men and women, blacks and whites, freemen and slaves—engaged in a folk uprising inspired by the Spirit of '76 and dedicated to the achievement of self-government.

1 Philip Vickers Fithian to Elizabeth Fithian

[Philip Vickers Fithian, *Letters to His Wife*. . . (Vineland, N.J., 1932), pp. 18-20.]

For Elizabeth (Betsey) Beatty Fithian, the revolutionary war was literally a family affair. When her husband of nine months joined Colonel Silas Newcomb's First Battalion of Cumberland County Militia as chaplain on June 20, 1776, and