



The Roles Women Played in the War of 1812

by Hellen Ferguson

Throughout history, women's roles in military campaigns have often been overlooked. The War of 1812 is frequently overlooked as well. There were women involved in the War of 1812 on both the American and British sides, and through their reminiscences, letters and journals, we can get a glimpse of what it was like in this war that spanned many acres and took two and a half years. Reading the letters of women who went through the war gives a glimpse of their time in history. Though their stories are seldom told, women did indeed have important roles to play.

There are many ways in which women helped the cause. Women on the battlefield helped pass water to the soldiers. In the camps, they were laundresses, seamstresses, and companions to the soldiers. Women were stationed in forts and garrisons as servants in high-ranking officers' houses and worked as cooks as well as nursemaids and laundresses and of course, at home, where they took care of family and possessions while their men were away at war. In this war, as in many, women took jobs doing war work while the men were away.

Among many women who were in camp was Mrs. Lydia B. Bacon, who was the wife of Lieutenant and Quartermaster Josiah Bacon. She kept a journal of her activities when on the move from camp to camp. In her entry dated August 2nd 1811, she writes:

"...tents are pitched on the side of the river, & fires made for the Soldiers to prepare their suppers, plenty of business going on-- Mrs A is making up her Husbands bed, & reprimanding Mrs. G. who being a little offended will not do the same for hers. I wish you could take a peep at us."1

On August 4th she writes of being woken up by the sounds of the drums. They were..."beating the tune that accompanies these words, 'Don't you hear your General say strike your Tents and march away'..."2 The camp soon departs. Among her more depressing thoughts for this day she writes "One infant has died today--happy Child, taken from this scene of sin & sorrow--"3

Her journals are very detailed, telling about the weather, and her travels. They provide yet another view of camp life.

Her view on her journey's importance is shown by this journal entry:

"Altho I wish much to see you yet as my husband was obliged to come, I never have for a moment regretted accompanying him, It is a great source of happiness that we can be together, & I have the satisfaction of knowing I am performing my duty."4

Mrs. Bacon shared the great fear most whites had of Indian massacres, just as many of us have a fear of being the victim of random street violence today. Mrs.

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The Roles Women Played in the War of 1812

The Americans at Prairie du Chien

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Bacon writes of her relief at her husband's survival of an attack by Indians, in which many others were killed or wounded:

" Still new mercies, call for our loudest, songs, of praise and gratitude, to him, who is our constant Benefactor & preserver. My Husband has returned in safety after being exposed in the most horrid of all Battles, an Indian one.....

I do not regret that Joslah was In this Battle, for I trust the kindness of God in thus sparing his life.....While bridling his Horse a ball hit his hoof & his own boot & at another time his hat.....The Indians attacked them a little before day which is their usual method...."5

Mrs. Bacon then further describes the attack on the camp in detail, and the sadness she and others felt when a boy, who was only twelve, searched for his father after the battle and "found him among the slain".6 She writes in her journal that, "Many Widows & Orphans, are made so, by this dreadful fight, when will Brother cease to lift his hand against his Brother, & learn War no more."7

She also writes about her feelings in receiving the news, finally, that her husband is not among the slain. It's revealing to read of her account of what the women in camp did while the Indian attack was going on. She writes:

"...Our situation was very exposed while the Troops were absent, for every thing went that could carry a musket & left us Women & Children without even a guard, Mrs W. & myselfe had loaded pistols at our bedside but I had some doubt if we should have been able to use them had we found it necessary, had the Indians known our situation a few of them could have Massacred the Inhabitants & burnt the Village, but was not permitted, a kind providence prevented."8

Although Mrs. Bacon was able to stay with her husband, many others were not so fortunate. Depending on the orders of that particular regiment, at times there was a lottery to see how many wives could go with their men on campaigns. Sometimes there were only six wives to 100 soldiers. The women who went were employed as laundresses or servants, even though they still looked after their own families.9

Even though life as they knew it at home had vanished, life still went on in the camp. At times, women gave birth. In one account, given in Mrs. Lydia B. Bacon's journal, she describes, in brief, one such happy occasion.

"...Mrs Weir, one of the Soldiers wives, had a daughter last night, it was born in a tent, on the banks of the Wabash."10

There were hard times, but also some light times. In Quebec, Anne Prevost, daughter of Governor General George Prevost, writes in her journal entry on January 10th 1812 that, "At 2 o'clock walked with Miss Bruyère, Miss Grant and Miss Baley about half way to the River Charles, which is now hard frozen. We had no gentlemen, nor did we meet with any adventures. Miss Bruyère for fun, took an unloaded pistol wrapt up in her handkerchief."11

It is very interesting to note that almost all of the diaries and letters that tell of the war are written by upper class ladies. Officers' wives and daughters were often literate whereas the regular soldiers wives usually were not. There are few journals written from the laundress' point of view, so most accounts are from others' observations. Most often the letters and journals kept by these ladies included details not mentioned in soldiers' or officers' journals. They wrote about

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the weather, their travels, the bonding with the other women in camp and their husbands' doings.

The War of 1812 spread over many acres and two and a half years. Also known as "Mr. Madison's War" by the opponents of President James Madison, the war was to take many turns. When the British arrived in Benedict, Maryland, in August 1814, and started their march towards Washington, it was President Madison's wife, Dolly, who was left alone, "save for a few loyal servants", to try and save what little she could before the British arrived. In letters she wrote to her sister Lucy, she describes what was happening around her. She tells Lucy how her husband told her she "should be ready at a moment's warning to enter" her "carriage and leave the city ". Having to leave one's home at any moment would be frightening enough without having to deal with the thought of losing a priceless momento. Dolly Madison, along with packing up important state documents, also had to worry about how to save "Gilbert Stuart's priceless full-length portrait of George Washington." She had to supervise the loading of the wagon with her possessions as well as the valuable items in the President's house. Then came the removal of Washington's portrait. She supervised the servants who removed the portrait and sent it on its way to a farm. She then left her home. She finally met up with her husband 36 hours later. When they returned to the White House, they found it burned.<sup>12</sup>

Some on the British side told their stories as well. In a letter to her cousin Charles, Alicia Cockburn, wife of a senior officer, tells of life in Montreal in 1814, at a camp in Upper Canada. She tells of the weather saying, "The Summer is very fine, and not so overpowering from heat as last year, but it is hot enough, and will be considerably more so...." She also makes a mention of the training of the British soldiers in the camp that was next to the one that her husband and herself were in. In the camp, there were "– Brigadiers – Grenadiers – & Fuzileers – Right – Left– here – there – march – halt – wheel – double-quick – tumble down –tumble up –fire away – thus they keep moving..." Alicia sees some humor in this as well, because in continuing her description of the scene before, she continues "...and a most moving scene it is, but I think if I commanded, I would move it a little nearer the enemy."<sup>13</sup>

In an earlier portion of her letter, she makes mention of her travels to the United States, stating that:

"I am at present meditating a Journey to Upper Canada, and even a trip into the United States in a Flag of Truce, which to do the Yankees justice they treat with uncommon civility especially when born by Ladies, whom they allow to go much farther, and peep about much more, than we should do in a similar case, whatever might be their beauty and accomplishments."<sup>14</sup>

It is interesting that in her letter she mentions the weather and her trip to the United States and the soldiers' activities, but she does not ever mention the conflicts of the war around her.

Another aspect of the war came from young Anne Prevost. She was 17 and the war seemed likely. She writes in her journal dated February 10th 1812 that, "Captain C. returned from the United States. This was the second time my Father had sent him to make observations and judge what probability there was of a War."<sup>15</sup> Her writing portrays her youth and the enjoyment of her surroundings.

"June 8th: Went with my Father and a party of ladies, his Staff, etc., to Lorette, a village of converted Indians, about 9 miles from Quebec. The Indians all paid their respects to the Governor, and danced their War Dance in our presence: the noise they made

was terrific:—it was more like the howling of dogs than the human voice."16

In a later entry, she describes hearing the news of war for the first time:

"June 25th: I was summoned in the midst of my French lesson to hear some news that had arrived. It was indeed an important piece of intelligence:—'America has declared War against England.' The news had arrived by an Express to some of the Quebec merchants....On this day I saw nothing before me but my Father's honour and glory. Although I knew how small a force we had to defend the Canadas, such was my confidence in his talents and fortune, that I did not feel the slightest apprehension of any reverse. I thought those abominable Yankees deserved a good drubbing for having dared to think of going to War with England, and surely there was no harm in rejoicing that the War had happened during my Father's Administration, because I thought he was the person best calculated to inflict on the Yankees the punishment they deserved."17

There is no doubt whose side she is on. It's interesting to note that she was only 17 years old when the war began. There are a few journal entries where she tells of her love and her heart, and fondness for her father and of the soldiers in his camp.

December 6th 1812 ".....Captain Milnes was very prepossessing. He was unbecomingly tall and had an awkward stoop, but his countenance was very intelligent and pleasing; indeed I will not even make one exception when I assert that when Captain M. was in good humour, he was the most agreeable person I ever met with.... I will frankly acknowledge that I could not see so much of his character and receive so much pleasing attention from him, without feeling my heart in some danger.... I resolved to be on my guard and to 'keep my heart with all diligence' till it was really sought. Had he tried to gain my affection he probably would have succeeded...."18

Being a general's daughter, Miss Prevost also shows pride in her country and the Canadian side. On June 3rd 1813 she describes an attack on Sackett Harbor:

"We heard that an attack has been made on Sackett's Harbour. My Father was there, and as much exposed to danger as any common soldier. Thanks be to the Almighty he is safe! The attack was made with only 800 men, and the American prisoners say their force was 3000. We were not altogether unsuccessful—we drove the enemy to their block houses—blew up a magazine, caused them to set fire to some valuable stores—took 3, 6 pounders and 150 prisoners, and then retreated to our ships. It was found impossible to take their forts without Artillery, which we had not with us—relying on the co-operation of the Navy which was prevented by an adverse wind. To this circumstance is attributed the failure of the expedition."19

The war took on different meaning for everyone involved. Some had their worst fears realized, and some, like Miss. Anne Prevost, were either too young or too detached to be worried about its consequences. Throughout their journals and letters, however, they describe a different take on the war than many of the reports given by soldiers and officers. There is the hope of love and the fear of its loss. There are descriptions of the weather and the landscape. And there is great pride in their own respective countries and the sides they were on.

Twenty years after she returning to the East, Mrs. Lydia B. Bacon collected all of her letters and entries into her journal, put them in chronological order, and wrote them all down in a manuscript.<sup>20</sup>

After her husband retired, Dolly Madison went with him to live in the family's home in Montpelier, Virginia. Dolly would later go back to Washington, "where she enjoyed the status of a revered matriarch."<sup>21</sup>

After the war, Anne Prevost would have a difficult time. Her father died, her mother died soon after, then her brother and sister also. "Anne spent the rest of her days, 'a spinster finding her solace in the One who made all life."<sup>22</sup>

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