

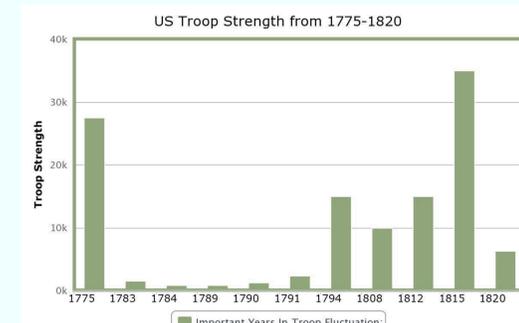


# Changing Attitudes towards Women in the American Army, 1775-1820

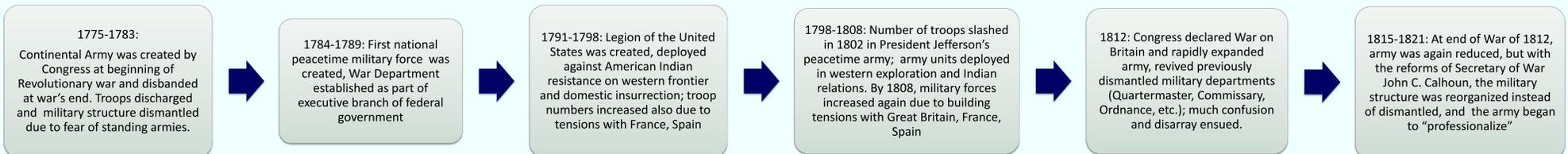
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## Abstract:

Like the British Army on which it was patterned, the first American army depended on civilians to provide Revolutionary War soldiers with essential support services that were not yet included within the formal military structure. Many of the civilian "camp followers" were women who accompanied the troops on military campaigns and performed duties such as nursing, food preparation, laundry, and sewing. Some of the women were more elite officers' wives, but the majority were women connected to the common soldiers and, like them, drawn from the lower classes of society. General George Washington, other military officers, and political leaders recognized the necessity of the women's labor, but were deeply ambivalent about women's presence in the military. They pointed to the women's potentially disruptive impact on military discipline and readiness, and they expressed concern about women's appropriateness anywhere near combat. The army was largely dismantled after the American victory in 1783, due to the new republic's distrust of standing armies. Over the next two decades, the size and structure of the national army fluctuated widely in response to intermittent periods of hostilities and peace. In 1811-12, as a second war with Great Britain loomed, the army had to be recreated rapidly with little preparation or centralized planning. The inevitable disarray, combined with overreliance on equally chaotic state militias, compromised American military performance at the war's outset. After the War of 1812 ended, both civilian and military leaders moved to create a new kind of peacetime military establishment that, although small in size, would be more efficient, more professional, and more easily mobilized when needed. These reforms, codified in new General Regulations issued in 1821, reduced the numbers of "camp followers" as newly formed departments absorbed many of the functions previously performed by women and, at the same time, erased the few remaining women from the historical record



## Fluctuating Size and Structure of US Army



## Camp Followers in Traditional European Armies

For hundreds of years, European armies were typically accompanied by large numbers of women and children, usually the wives, widows, and families of enlisted soldiers and, occasionally, also officers' wives. Serving when needed as cooks, washerwomen, nurses, seamstresses, foragers, sutlers (suppliers), and even laborers carrying baggage, hauling water, and helping set up camp, female "camp followers" commonly performed a range of essential functions for the armies. The women were not officially enlisted nor considered part of the military - fighting was strictly men's work - but in exchange for their services, many of them were provided accommodations, rations, and sometimes transportation. When the Continental Congress established the first American army in 1775 to fight for independence from Great Britain, the Commander-in-Chief George Washington and the other military leaders simply copied the organization and system of the British Army, including the reliance on the support services and casual labor provided by civilian camp followers.



Artist's rendition of traditional camp followers during the American Revolution

## Women in the Continental Army during the Revolution

While women of all backgrounds participated in the United States Army, the role of women in military camps was differentiated by their class status. It was not uncommon for officers' wives to visit their husbands between battles or while troops were positioned at their winter quarters, when it would typically become a time of dinners, dances, and celebration in the officers' quarters. The genteel "ladies" often brought with them comforts from home. These and other elite "ladies" supported the Revolutionary Army by organizing on the home front to help raise money and obtain supplies to help meet the needs of the army, from a distance. In contrast, lower class women connected to soldiers, often having a hard time surviving during wartime shortages, accompanied the army even during campaigns and in battle. In exchange for performing the daily, often very strenuous domestic tasks that made it possible for their men to wage war, the camp following women did not receive pay but might receive accommodations and subsistence for themselves and their children. Many women became camp sutlers, selling liquor and other commodities to the troops. Some who were desperate for money might turn to prostitution, despite the many army regulations against it.

## The Attitude of General George Washington toward Women with the Army

As Commander-in Chief of the Continental Army, General George Washington dealt directly with army troops, within camps, during troop movements, and on the battlefield. Within his general orders, there are several instances where he commented on the women following the army. In August of 1777, for example, Washington described the camp followers as a hindrance:

*"the multitude of women in particular, especially those who are pregnant, or have children, are a clog upon every movement....get rid of all such as are not absolutely necessary."*

As the war progressed, more and more women followed the army, in support of their husbands or in hopes to earn something from their services. With the harshness of army life, many women became exhausted and sometimes requested to ride in the baggage wagons. Also in 1777, on several occasions, Washington responded with stern orders:

*"...women are expressly forbid any longer, under any licence at all, to ride in the wagons...women are to march with the baggage."*

*"No woman under any pretence whatsoever is to go with the army, but to follow the baggage."*

For Washington, the appearance of his army was one of the most important factors in gaining popular support for the American military effort. He felt that the unruly and disorganized wagons, baggage, and women trailing behind made the army appear disorderly and amateurish rather than well trained, professional, and capable of defeating the much larger British Army. On the eve of his August 1777 march through Philadelphia, Washington instructed those responsible for the baggage:

*"avoid the city entirely & move on to the bridge at the middle ferry...Not a woman belonging to the army is to be seen with the troops on their march thro the city."*

General George Washington's General Orders from August 23, 1777

Although Washington viewed camp followers as a nuisance and distraction for his army, at the same time he knew that they were needed to execute essential domestic tasks. Washington also feared that if he removed all female followers, the soldier-husbands of many of the women would be forced to desert the army to help support their families.

## Women in the Early United States Army through the War of 1812

After the Revolutionary War, even when the army was reduced in size, female camp followers remained part of the support structure. Official records listing the number of rations permitted to each rank included women (the only unranked category, at the bottom of the list). The image to the left shows the rations issued to officers, enlisted men, and women in the army of 1798. Note that the men have specific titles and ranks that identify their specific functions, but the women are simply labeled "women."

Even through the war of 1812, women continued to be listed in military records. The image to the left represents an estimate of military expenses, made in January of 1812, in preparation for the coming war with Great Britain. It gives specific monthly salaries, ration amounts, and a total estimate of the cost of raising an army for one year. Women still remain, still as an undifferentiated category.

## John C. Calhoun Reforms the Army

With the appointment of John C. Calhoun as Secretary of War in 1817, the United States Army began to see its first systematic reforms. Instead of turning to the unreliable citizen-soldier state militias for national defense, Calhoun proposed creating a standing federal army even during peacetime. He believed that a more organized, well-prepared army, minimal in size but with all the needed departments and commanding officers in place, could be mobilized and expanded for war much more quickly and effectively than had been the case with the War of 1812. Calhoun and others argued successfully that war was not an art, as it had previously been viewed, but rather it should be understood as a science, to be run by highly trained professionals. Congress was persuaded and passed legislation to restructure the peacetime army and expand the military academy at West Point. It was with this transformation, gradually implemented from the 1820s to the 1850s, that women's relationship to the military began to disappear.

## Women in the Professionalizing Army after 1815

Quartermaster of battalion,	-	-	15	1	3 15-90	7 15-90
Surgeon of battalion,	-	-	60	1 1-3	4 60-90	10 60-90
Surgeon's mate,	-	-	40	1	3 15-90	7 15-90
Quartermaster sergeant,	-	-	15	-	-	-
Sergeant,	-	-	15	-	-	-
Trumpet major,	-	-	11	-	-	-
Trumpeter,	-	-	10	-	-	-
Saddler,	-	-	10	-	-	-
Farrier,	-	-	10	-	-	-
Corporal,	-	-	10	-	-	-
Dragoon,	-	-	8 1-3	-	-	-
Colonel of infantry,	-	-	-	-	18 60-90	20 60-90
Lieutenant colonel,	-	-	60	1 1-3	11	17
Major,	-	-	50	1 1-3	8	14
Captain,	-	-	40	1	6 30-90	10 30-90
Captain lieutenant,	-	-	26 2-3	1	3 15-90	7 15-90
Lieutenant,	-	-	26 2-3	1	3 15-90	7 15-90
Ensign,	-	-	20	1	3 15-90	7 15-90
Paymaster and clothier,	-	-	30	1	6 30-90	10 30-90
Adjutant,	-	-	13	1	3 15-90	7 15-90

Portion of a 1818 pay and ration chart, completely excluding the mention of women from the list.

After the War of 1812 concluded, reforms initiated by the Secretary of War John Calhoun, legislated by Congress, and codified in the General Regulations of the Army and Military Institutes of 1821, restructured the American army and rearranged how support services were provided to the troops. Newly formed army departments began to take over duties and functions that had been performed by women "camp followers" in the past. Some officers' and soldiers' wives and families continued to accompany the army, especially to the isolated and remote western frontier posts, but it was no longer on any official basis nor tracked in official records. Only a much reduced number of women were employed with the army, specifically as regimental "laundresses" paid by the piece and as "matrons" assisting mostly male nurses in army hospitals. Ostensibly in the name of military discipline, professionalization, and fiscal responsibility, the age of the "Camp Follower" was over.