Hidden Figures: Women of the War of 1812

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  History buffs all know the story of the brave Dolley Madison heroically carrying out a portrait of George Washington from the burning White House as the British took control of the capital city, Washington, D.C., during the War of 1812 herself. Unfortunately, the legendary tale of this First Lady heroine is just a myth. No one, however, seems to talk about the true acts of heroism by women during America’s second war for Independence. These lionhearted and lesser known women include the valiant Lydia Bacon, Betsy Doyle, and the First Lady herself.

  Women during the war gave supplies to men on the battlefield, and worked in camps as seamstresses, laundresses, and soldiers’ companions. Lydia B. Bacon, the wife of Lieutenant Josiah Bacon, kept a journal as she moved from camp to camp. Lydia’s entries throughout her time working were always extremely detailed, giving an inside looks to the camps even 205 years later (Bacon). One of her entries tells of an attack by a group of Native Americans, and consequently her relief that her husband is not among those dead. Her fears represent a picture of the stressful lives so many women lived, but because she documented them, posterity could begin to understand and appreciate the sacrifice these women made (Ferguson).

Lydia’s journal entries continue about Mr. Madison’s war as she and Josiah move from Fort Independence to Vincennes, Indiana, and back. Their winter of 1811 was spent in Vincennes as Lydia waited for her husband to return from a campaign lead against a hostile tribe along the Wabash River (Crawford). This campaign ended with the infamous Battle of Tippecanoe. The Bacons traveled by horseback to Detroit with the troops. After the surrender of General William Hull, Lydia and Josiah were taken prisoner on a British ship to Erie. After being paroled in Newark, he and Lydia were excused from advancing to Quebec and returned to their home in Massachusetts (Crawford).

But what about women who were directly involved in the action? One such woman is Betsy Doyle, who became quite a local celebrity for her bravery at Fort Niagara. In 1812, her husband Andrew joined the Fort Niagara’s First Artillery and Betsy accompanied him as a laundress. Although he was captured in October of the same year, Betsy remained at the fort with their four children. On November 21, 1812, the fort exchanged cannon fire with British forces. Betsy carried what were known as “red hot shots” to a cannon on the roof, which were called red hot shots due to the fact that the iron cannon balls were heated until they were literally red hot by a blacksmith (Antoine). The fort’s own commandant compared her to the legendary St. Joan of Arc (Wright).

During a storm on the night of December 18, 1813, Doyle donned a uniform and musket and stood guard in the rain, shaming the timid militia who were too fearful to do the job themselves (“War”). The very next night, British and Native forces captured the fort, and Doyle barely escaped with her four children. After traveling 310 miles through the harsh winter, she finally arrived at the Greenbush Cantonment in April of 1814. She was, however, severely ill with a fever. Because her husband had been born in Canada, he was seen as a traitor and imprisoned in Dartmoor Prison in England. Upon release, he never reunited with Betsy and remarried. Betsy later died in poverty, unfortunately never being paid for her services to the U.S. Army (“War”). “A kindhearted woman gains honor, but ruthless men gain only wealth” rings true for Betsy, who earned honor and respect for her aid provided to the army, yet she gained nothing material for it (*New International Version*, Proverbs 11.16). Not only did she sacrifice her life for America, she sacrificed her family as well.

Though the story of her single handedly saving the famous portrait of George Washington has been proven false, Dolley Madison was still a female leader in her husband’s war. Dolley made frequent trips to the White House’s roof with a spyglass, searching desperately across the horizon for an American victory. When the British troops were only mere miles away from the capital city, Dolley grabbed a copy of the Declaration of Independence and hid it in one of her suitcases (“Dolley”).

After the city burned and their presidential mansion was destroyed, Dolley was reunited with James Madison in Virginia. Madison returned to Washington, D.C., as soon as he could, but insisted Dolley stay out of the city until it was safe. Although many urged the family to move somewhere safer, Dolley dug her heels into the ground and refused, with James following suit. Doing this, Dolley quickly found support throughout the country. The overwhelming anger at the destruction of a national symbol such as the White House coupled with respect for her refusal to leave and saving George Washington’s portrait from the flames (it was truly carried out by servants, although Dolley gave the order to make sure the painting was saved), the United States began seeing the First Lady in a whole new light (“Dolley”).

While the House of Representatives did not share her idea of staying in D.C. (with a 79-37 vote to abandon the city) Dolley remained adamant in staying. After extensive lobbying by herself and her allies, both Congressional houses finally voted to stay in the Capitol, as well as rebuild the White House (“Dolley”). When the peace treaty to end the war was approved congratulations were given to President and the First Lady, James becoming a national hero and Dolley becoming a symbol of resilience for years to come.

Women have earned their place in history for generations, including one of the darkest times in the United States. Lydia Bacon gave an extremely detailed look inside the war from a female perspective with her letters and journal that never left her side (Bacon). Betsy Doyle was not afraid to get her hands dirty and did the job that the men it was meant for were too intimidated to do themselves, and the First Lady herself made a nationwide example by not allowing anyone to move her from her home. Women are still showcasing this bravery today, fighting overseas for freedom in the military, working to save lives in hospitals as doctors, and protecting civilians with police departments. Women have earned the right to the title “hero” just as men have, and may they keep this title in the centuries to come.

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Biography

My name is Emily Adduci, and I am a 17-year-old senior at Pope County High School in Golconda, Illinois. Like key women in America’s heritage, I believe in a strong work ethic, dedication, and passion. I have implemented these personal philosophies throughout my educational career.

My junior year, I received the American History Award from Mrs. Krysta Graves for top yearly average, as well as maintaining a 3.7 GPA on a 4.0 scale. I believe there is more than academics to being a well rounded student. Thus, I am involved in many extra-curricular activities. I am currently in the National Honor Society, Drama Club, and Art Club. I am not only a member of these clubs, but I am in leadership positions in them as well. I am the Treasurer for the National Honor Society, Drama Club President, and Art Club Secretary. In the past, I also competed on WYSE and Math Team. I was also elected by my peers as “Class Favorite” of the Class of 2018.

All of my endeavors in high school are meant to propel me into college and eventually the workforce. My plans for college are to double major in Medical Lab Technology and Criminal Justice in hopes of one day becoming a forensic nurse. I also plan on receiving my Master’s degree in lab tech from University of Arizona. History has always been a love of mine. Therefore, I am the perfect applicant for this award; it will make history a part of my future.