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# Evidence of Children at Revolutionary War Sites

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## Evidence of Children at Revolutionary War Sites

### **Cover Page Footnote**

This paper would never have been started without the help of Robert Apuzzo who alerted me to the opportunities for salvage at the Telco site and put me in touch with some of the salvagers. Miss Talbot-Rice of the National Army Museum in London copied many of the documents for me as did the librarians of the West Point library and the New York Historical Society. To my wife and co-workers at the Brooklyn Children's Museum are due much thanks for their patience and forbearance in listening, suggesting, and correcting.

## Evidence of Children at Revolutionary War Sites

by Michael Cohn

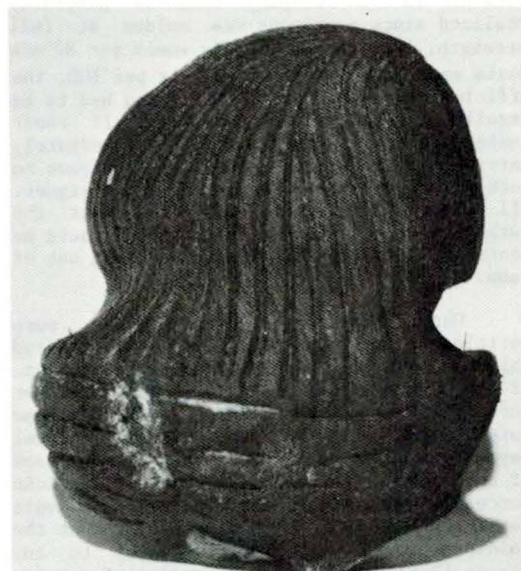
### INTRODUCTION

A bed post doll (Figures 1 and 2) recovered from the debris of the Telco Block site in lower Manhattan, New York, gave the impetus for a re-examination of the evidence for the presence of women and children at Revolutionary War sites, particularly those known in New York City.

The doll, hand carved from the knob at the end of a bed or chair post, must have been made for a specific child and presumably was carved locally. Bed post dolls are found in small numbers in the collections of the Brooklyn Children's Museum and the Woodbury Strong Museum in Rochester. All of them date from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and are classed as folk art (Mary Ellen Earl Perry, personal communication 1983). It is not the kind of thing that would catch the eye of a marauding soldier as a souvenir to pick up and then discard casually into the camp debris. Nor is it fine enough to have been sold at the New York market.

This doll was not the only toy found at the Telco site. Salvagers also picked up a hand-made whizzer and earthenware marbles. A whizzer is a metal disk with two holes and a serrated edge used by children to produce a buzzing sound when spun on thread. All of this material was found in the gray clay level which contained material dating to the Revolutionary War period. This gray clay preserved wood, leather, and bone items and produced a few Georgian coins and buttons of the 57th British Regiment as well.

Many toys such as whizzers, marbles, doll dishes, earthenware sheep, doll parts, and whistles were also recorded by Calver and Bolton in their extensive excavations at the Riverdale defense line in the Bronx, campsites in northern Manhattan, and at Richmond, Staten Island (Bolton 1915; Calver and Bolton 1950). Work at Fort Independence in the Bronx in which I participated in 1958 produced marbles and a single die made out of a bullet which would have been useful for children's games but would hardly have been acceptable for gamblers, since the numbers were misplaced (Lopez 1978). Like most archaeologists we relegated such things to the back of the lists of "other finds" in 1958. Today I probably would take a closer look and attribute these items to children of the camp instead of to ownership by soldiers. Marbles are played by groups of boys from five years up, not by soldiers. Dolls are for girls to play with and in no possible way can the finds of doll dishes and doll parts be attributed to the soldiers of the eighteenth century.



**Figures 1 and 2. Front and back view of hand carved bed post doll recovered from Telco Block site in lower Manhattan. Height is 3¼ inches. (Photo by Bob Apuzzo.)**

### WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN THE CAMPS

Documentary evidence shows us that a large number of women and children were part of the established strength of the regiments of the British army and the American forces whose regulations were patterned after them (Wier 1916). As a matter of fact, between 10% and 20% of the population of the camps consisted of women and children. These were not "camp followers" or children casually hanging around the camp but lawful wives and legitimate issue. They were listed in the regimental returns as being "on the strength" and were entitled to rations and transportation furnished by the quartermaster.

Sutlers selling luxuries to the soldiers and "casual" women were also part of the camps but are not listed in returns, although many of the orderly books have much to say about them.

Every commanding officer tried to reduce the number of non-combatants, official and unofficial. There were instances where women fought alongside the men, but it was unusual and unofficial in the British service. However, Molly Pitcher and Margaret Corbin are two officially recognized cases on the American side. Women wishing to return to the British Isles were offered transportation money and a place on the "poor rolls" of their parishes to induce them to leave America. Sergeants and junior officers were instructed to discourage their men from marrying (Simes 1776). A commanding officer's dislike for having married women with the army was as much due to the expense of feeding them as the fear of a reduction of efficiency in combat (Kopperman 1982).

Proportionally, there were more women present in a company than is generally realized since a company was seldom at full strength. A ratio of six women per 80 men would seem more accurate than six per 100, the official company figure. All women had to be legally married to enlisted men. If their husbands died or were killed they immediately married again. There seems to have been no lack of suitors for an experienced campaigner. All wives and children were under the authority of the provost marshal and could be sentenced to whipping and/or drumming out of camp.

Under the regulations wives were entitled to half the ration of a soldier, and children were entitled to a quarter ration. If the wives did laundry, tailoring, or nursing they were entitled to pay at the same rate as an enlisted man. However, actual payment was uncertain in the British army even if not quite so dubious as in the American forces. Some British officers tried to avoid letting their men have any cash so that the soldiers would not have any money to buy liquor (Kopperman 1982). Stoppages of pay for real or imagined shortcomings was an easy way to accomplish this. As archaeologists we know how relatively few coins are found on Revolutionary War sites. It is likely that any ready cash was immediately spent for additional food or drink at the sutlers' or in the markets held near all army garrisons. Any loot of gold or silver would be disposed of the same way, which accounts for the fact that so little is ever found.

Some commanding officers managed to bend the regulations in order to discourage the wives and children of enlisted men. General Burgoyne managed to reduce the number of wives to three per 100 men based on the difficulty of his route of march through the northern woods. This opposition to wives on the part of General Burgoyne did not extend to

officers' spouses such as Lady Acland and the Baroness von Riedesel. A letter commending Lady Acland is quoted in Bamfield (1974). General William Howe was known to be extremely friendly with the wife of his commissary, Mr. Loring. When the British were evacuating Boston in 1775, on the other hand, General Howe, generally considered a humane man, issued orders that women and children should be issued only rice and flour for their ration (Kemble 1883).

Despite the efforts of officers the numbers of wives and children with the army did not decrease. Daniel Wier, commissary for the British army in New York, claimed that 4,973 men, 787 women, and 566 children were being victualled in May 1777 (Curtis 1972). This was for only 10 regiments. In August 1781 the figures for the same 10 regiments were 5,183 men, 856 women, and 653 children. For all the forces under British command in 1781 there were 3,621 wives and 4,156 children (Calver and Bolton 1950; Kopperman 1982). Apparently these figures are for enlisted men only. Officers were always entitled to bring their wives, children, and servants at their own expense although junior officers were often discouraged from doing so.

British navy regulations provided that women should be put ashore when a warship sailed. However, enforcement of this regulation seems to have been somewhat uneven. An eye witness account of the Battle of the Nile, fought a mere 10 years after the end of the Revolutionary War, casually mentions that women served as powder monkeys on the line-of-battle ship Goliath. A number of them were wounded, and one was killed. Another woman gave birth during the battle (Nicol 1983). Commanders of transports and smaller fighting ships were likely to be more lax in enforcing regulations than were the senior captains commanding Britain's capital ships.

Parish records from the period are another source of information. The famous Trinity Church in Manhattan has burial records going back to May 1777. Between May and December of that year 36 children whose fathers are noted as belonging to the armed forces are listed as having been buried in this churchyard. In age the children ranged from 10 days old to 13 years. Eleven of the 36 children buried at Trinity Church were the offspring of officers. This disproportion can be explained by the fact that officers were likely to be members of the Church of England (Episcopal). Enlisted men of the Scottish regiments were likely to be Presbyterians, the Irish were Catholics, and most of the Hessians were Lutherans. Their children were likely to have been buried in the cemeteries of their faiths or in outlying graveyards near the camps rather than at Trinity.

## CONCLUSIONS

What are the implications for archaeology and historical reconstruction of

this neglected data? For one thing we should re-examine the lists of artifacts recovered from Revolutionary War sites. Toys should be attributed to the presence of children in the camp rather than to playful soldiers risking the wrath of their sergeants at the next kit inspection. Perhaps some of the paste jewels and the large quantity of fine ceramics should be attributed to use by wives of soldiers rather than by officers. Some fine glassware and china might have formed part of the furnishings of the officers' mess, but the records seem to indicate that officers spent very little off-duty time at the camps. Enlisted men would hardly have cared to add the extra weight of ceramics to their 80-pound marching packs. Women and children were not issued mess gear and had to procure their eating equipment locally. They also had the means to transport them aboard the baggage wagons. That such wives were "light-fingered" is well documented. We can just imagine such "survivor types" and army brats left at loose ends near houses marked as "enemy property". No wonder there is so much civilian crockery found at army sites.

It might even be profitable to re-examine some of the larger pieces of fine ceramics for signs of re-use as toys. We must also accept the presence of civilian-dressed women and children as part and parcel of the scene in eighteenth century army encampments. Those of us who re-enact or tell stories of the period of the Revolutionary War should now give appropriate roles in adequate numbers to the women and children who must have been present at the time and place we are trying to recreate.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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