



WOMEN  
*of*  
COURAGE

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# INTRODUCTION

When [Elizabeth Cady Stanton](#) first proposed that women should have the right to vote, her father was so upset he went to her home in Seneca Falls, New York, to see if she was sick. He was relieved to see she was alright, but he could not reconcile himself to her behavior. "My child," he told her, "I wish you had waited until I was under the sod before you had done this foolish thing."

That was in 1848. Today, women accept new challenges, create new roles, and push for equality in every aspect of their lives. In following their progress and celebrating their perseverance, I have been prompted to take a closer look at the outstanding women in our past. There are an extraordinary number of doctors, writers, educators, and scientists, but among these distinguished women, there is a smaller group in which I believe today's women can take special pride - the women of courage.

Courage is sometimes defined as the quality of mind and spirit that enables a person to meet danger, difficulty, or pain with firmness. There are varieties of courage. *Bravery* is daring and defiant; heroism, noble and self-sacrificing; fortitude, patient and persevering. American women have shown them all.

In this book, I have chosen twelve women who illustrate my concept of courage. They range from an Indian to a United States senator, an Irish immigrant to the daughter of slaves, to a first lady. Most of them wore bonnets and ankle-length skirts, few had college degrees, and only a handful ever stepped into a voting booth. When it came to courage, however, these women not only spoke the same language as their sisters of today, but their voices came through in strong, clear tones.

My look into the past has taught me about the tradition of feminine courage in the United States. Like everything else in history, it has been an evolution. We can see its roots in the physical courage the first American women needed to confront the treacherous Atlantic and the equally harrowing wilderness.

[William Bradford](#), the Pilgrim leader, summed it up in the terse, heartbreaking words of his history of the [Plymouth Colony's](#) first terrible year: "But that which was most sad and lamentable was that in two or three months time, half of their

company dyed, especially in January and February, being the depth of winter and wanting houses and other comforts, being infected with the scurvy and other diseases which this long voyage . . . had brought upon them.”

Along with the constant threat of death from disease and starvation, the first settlers also had to contend with the danger of Indians. Volumes have been written by and about pioneer women who were captured by Indians and survived only by enduring the same physical hardships their captors accepted as a matter of course.

In Massachusetts, forty-year-old [Hannah Duston](#) saw her week-old infant smashed against a tree. She was then forced to make a winter march of more than 100 miles in bare feet. Pennsylvania teenager [Mary Jemison](#) witnessed the murders of her father, mother, sister, and two brothers. Yet these women, and the others who came after them, found the strength to overcome despair, humiliation, and exhaustion.

In our era, when women are police officers and serve in the military, a woman’s physical courage has become a subject of debate. The skeptics who doubt our ability to handle such roles obviously never heard of [Margaret Corbin](#), who helped fire her husband’s cannon during the British attack on New York in 1776, or [Nancy Hart](#), who trapped five marauders loyal to the British Crown in her cabin on Georgia’s Broad River, shot one dead, wounded another, and took the remaining three captive.

This courage sustained tens of thousands of nameless pioneer women who walked and rode beside their men in the 100 years that Americans surged westward. It burned within runaway slaves like [Harriet Tubman](#), a “conductor” on the famous [Underground Railroad](#), who smuggled some 300 black men and women across the [Mason-Dixon Line](#) to freedom. It propelled [Amelia Earhart](#) - who electrified the world with her long-distance flights in the 1930s - into the heavens.

In the decades after the [American Revolution](#), as the frontier gradually moved away from the Atlantic coastline, American women began developing another tradition of courage. It was a special blend of physical and moral tenacity that male courage often lacked.