During the Revolutionary War, women found unique opportunities to exert a sense of national loyalty and love of country. Three of these resolute women were the Brewster sisters: Elinor (also spelled as Eleanor), Jennette (also spelled as Janet and Jennet) and Agnes Brewster are remembered as Revolutionary War heroines who went to great lengths to feed, clothe and support Washington’s army.

A Tenacious Trio

Born in what is now present-day Rockingham County, Va., it seems likely that Elinor, Jennette and Agnes inherited their patriotism from their father, James Brewster. In a family composed mostly of women—Brewster and his wife, also named Elinor, had six daughters and two sons—Brewster set an example of public service for all his children. Records from Augusta County (which later formed Rockingham County) reveal that the girls’ father was active in local affairs, with his name continually used as a witness to wills, appraiser of estates, a settler of provincial controversies, a member of the Virginia militia and the appointed Constable of the Pasture in 1757. Although Brewster was past the age for military service at the start of the Revolutionary War, he was fairly wealthy and used that advantage to lead the family’s charge in offering their food and property to Patriot militia camped nearby.

Though likely primed by their father’s example, the young sisters worked tirelessly of their own accord, with the younger sisters, Jennette and Agnes, barely teenagers at the time. The trio cooked and baked bread in a small durable Dutch oven, a family relic known today as the “Washington oven,” then carried food to the nearby soldiers.

Because the family owned a large herd of sheep, the sisters sheared their wool and wove it into yarn, which they then used to knit clothing to keep soldiers from frostbite. The sisters were also known to melt their household utensils and mold bullets from it to supply soldiers with ammunition. This boldness of spirit remained in Elinor, the eldest and likely the sisters’ de facto ringleader, throughout her life. In the book Maxwell History and Genealogy (C.E. Pauley, 1916), authors Florence Wilson Houston, Laura Cowan Blaine and Ella Dunn Mellette relate a story about Elinor told by an ancestor: “Grandfather had sometimes to go to mill—a trip that took two or even three days, if conditions were unfavorable. For this time he must leave his wife and young children alone in the wilderness. During one of these times of absence grandmother heard Indians about. Weapons or bodily strength were not the resources of defense upon which she must depend; they must be the invisible, though powerful, influence of the spirit. Courage and self-possession were all that she had. She made up a great fire on the hearth; put her children to bed, set her big spinning wheel between the two opposite doors, and opened the doors. Then she spun all night to show the Indians she was not afraid. They would come to the door, would stand looking at that little figure walking back and forth, back and forth, defenseless but for her courage, and say ‘Brave squaw, brave squaw!’ and grandmother was not disturbed.”

Together in God’s Acre

Years later and with the war won, the sisters, along with their husbands and children, would eventually move from Virginia and settle in the wilds of Indiana, becoming a prominent and influential family in Bloomington. On a small knoll now surrounded by Indiana University’s campus, the courageous heroines of the Revolution rest in Dunn Cemetery, known locally as “God’s Acre.”

Created from land belonging to Elinor’s husband, Samuel Dunn, the 60-foot-by-110-foot cemetery remains protected by the university through a deed created at the time of the Dunn farm’s purchase in 1883. The deed states that the small plot is to remain in use as a cemetery “to secure and perpetuate the descendants of Elinor Dunn, Agnes Alexander and Jennet Irwin . . . and to those with whom they shall repose together as one family in the long night of death.”

To this day, Indiana University honors the deed and takes care to prove lineage when burial requests are made. Sisters Elinor, Jennette and Agnes are celebrated for their strength, courage and unwavering devotion to the Patriot cause—as well as for serving when and how they saw fit, regardless of their age or gender.