



**Julia Rhinehart Powell**

Courtesy of Marion Wallace

# Julia Rhinehart Powell

## *A Forerunner for Women in the Military*

BY *MARTHA BEGGS ORTH*

There were only 11,275 of them in the whole United States, and our own Julia Rhinehart Powell, resident of the Ball-Sellers House from 1921-1957, was one of them. I am referring to the Navy Yeomen (F) of World War I, the first enlisted women ever allowed in the U.S. military. They were popularly referred to as "Yeomanettes."

In March 1917, at the direction of the Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, the Navy started recruiting women into the Naval Reserve for jobs such as clerks, radio electricians, accountants, and factory workers. This was done primarily to release males for active duty manning warships. Women around the country volunteered, but by far the largest force was centered here in the Washington area. It generally took a woman a day to file the application, take a brief test, pass a cursory physical, and swear to support and defend the Constitution. She was in for a four-year hitch and started work immediately. No formal indoctrination was provided, but night classes were held in naval routine and regulations.

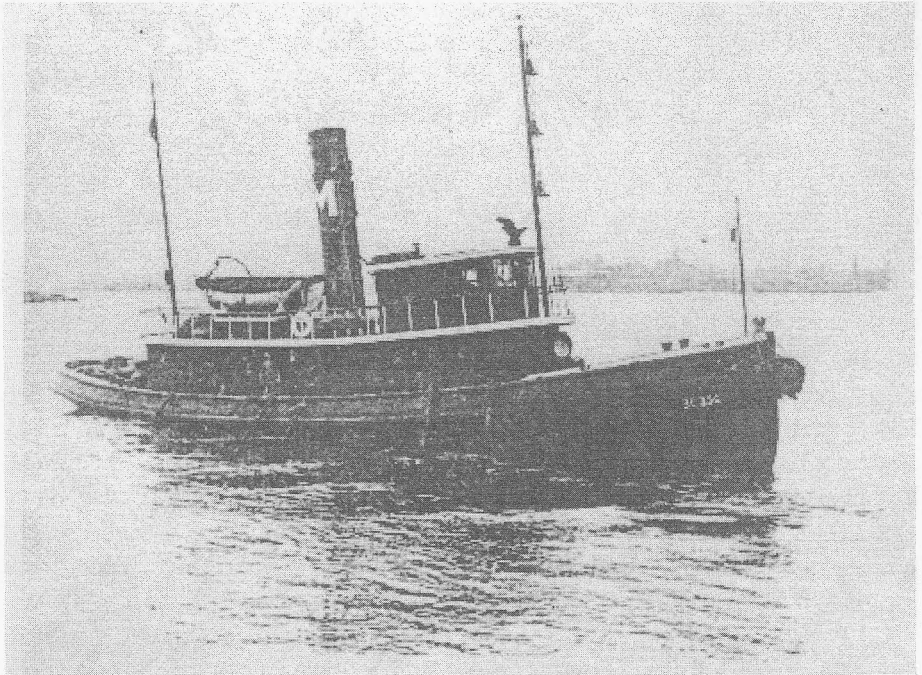
Their uniforms were controversial — described in some cases as "smart" and by some of the women who wore them as "impossible." They wore blue serge ankle-length skirts and straight jackets in winter, white drill in summer. Their hats were hard, heavy flat dark blue hats for winter and straw sailor hats for summer. Apparently there was no regulation footwear. Heavy navy capes completed the winter costume, which were described as "looking like that which George Washington wore when crossing the Delaware."

The women received the regular pay of a yeoman: 3rd class yeoman \$30 a month; 2nd class \$35; 1st class \$40; and chief yeoman \$60. They also received a uniform allowance, medical care, and war risk insurance. Because the women were not given quarters, they received an allowance of \$2.00 a day. Some of the women teamed up in groups of 4-6 and rented houses or apartments together, some lived with their families, and others lodged singularly.

They worked six days a week and often late at night and on Sundays. They were full of patriotic ardor and a sense of responsibility to the war effort. Some worked as switchboard operators, decoded cables, trans-

lated foreign documents, became fingerprint experts and draftsmen, or worked on production lines in factories, but most did routine clerical work. Some units, particularly at large stations, had regular drill periods, perhaps three times a week. They were particularly wanted for parades, Liberty bond drives, honor guards, recruiting stations, and war rallies. One yeoman (F) alone recruited 10,000 men for the Army and Navy in New York City.

In some naval districts shore-based personnel were assigned for administrative purposes to a ship. In two places I read that the yeomen (F) were assigned to sunken tugs lying on the bottom of the Potomac River, but I have not been able to substantiate that statement. Our Julia was assigned to the USS Triton, a tugboat. According to naval records, there have been five Tritons; Julia's was the first, a steam powered, steel-hulled tug constructed in 1889 and used by the Navy until it was sold in 1930. This tug operated out of the Washington, DC Navy Yard. She steamed up and down the Potomac River to the Naval Proving Grounds and Powder Factory, pushing barges loaded with materials for producing gunpowder. It is



Courtesy of Naval Historical Center Photo Department  
**USS Triton**

unknown if Julia ever even saw or stepped onto her decks, but for the sake of local policy, this was her assigned ship.

The career span of the yeomen (F) turned out to be quite brief. They were first recruited in March 1917. The war ended November 11, 1918, and the final parade for the women was July 30, 1919, even though they had signed up for four years. They were kept on inactive status until their enlistments expired, receiving a retainer of \$1 a month. None of the women ever saw combat, and only a few went abroad. Fifty-seven died while in active service—most from the deadly influenza epidemic in the fall of 1918. Julia caught the flu at that time and was out on medical leave for two weeks, from October 13 to 28, 1918.

According to Julia's records, she was inducted into the service at the Washington Navy Yard on August 30, 1918. She was one month shy of being 37 years old—which was old by comparison with most of the other women who were 19, 20, or 21 years old. She said she was born September 24, 1881 at Linville Depot, VA. Her mother was Victoria Elizabeth Rhinehart and her father was Isaac Newton Rhinehart. Her occupation was clerk and dressmaker. She was on active duty from September 3, 1918 to July 31, 1919 (the final parade). Her rank at discharge was Yeoman 2nd class. Her address upon entry was 1440 Clifton St. NW Washington, but her post-office address at discharge was "Glencarlyn, VA." However, the Navy still paid her travel allowance to her hometown at the time of her enrollment—Linville Depot—the princely sum of \$7.55. She was described on her medical record as 5'4", 127 lb., brown hair, hazel eyes, and with a "ruddy" complexion.

After being honorably discharged from the military, Julia married another veteran, Army veteran William B. Powell, in 1920, and they bought the old house today known as Ball-Sellers. The Powells had no children, but they did raise an important child—Marian (Rhinehart) Sellers (now Mrs. David Wallace), who inherited the house in 1969 and donated it to the Arlington Historical Society in 1975. Marian Rhinehart had been orphaned at age 9 in Chicago and was sent down here to live with her father's sister, Julia Rhinehart Powell. Aunt Julia was a loving substitute mother, but a perfectionist when it came to sewing. Marian still remembers today having to take out poor embroidery stitches. "Take it out and do it right" was Julia's motto.

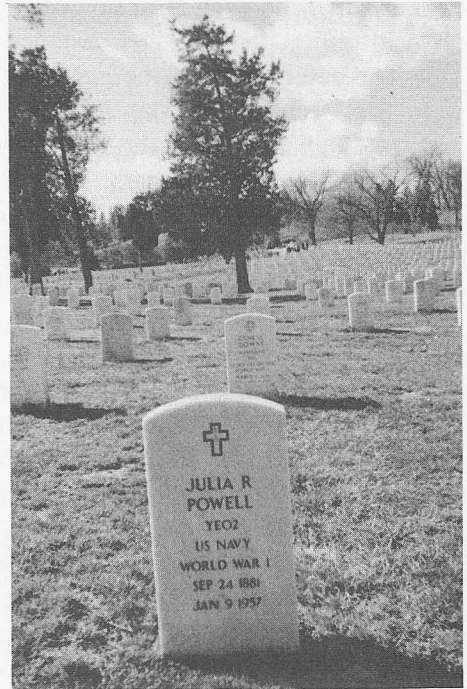
When Julia and William lived at the Ball-Sellers, they had chickens and apple trees, and Julia grew dahlias that were 6 feet tall and as big as dinner plates. The cabin was the kitchen/dining room for the house, and the lean-to was the pantry. Julia cooked over a wood burning stove and was a wonderful cook. There was electricity in the house, but no running

water until 1938. Julia really wanted a bathroom, and kept on about installing one, but Uncle Will didn't think much of that idea. He would say, "Where would we put it?" thinking that would end the matter. But Julia knew exactly where to put it—between the screened porch and the cabin was a small square open space—just right for a bathroom. And that's where the plumbing went.

Julia Powell is really key to the survival of the house today in its pure, intact state. Few women would have put up with living in primitive conditions with old floors, drafty windows, and no bath. People wanted pine paneling and aluminum siding, but she lived in the old house as it was, cared for it, and didn't change it, so that today we still have an eighteenth century wooden roof, original floors, hand-made windows, old chair rails, and even an eighteenth century lock on the cabin door.

When Julia died on January 9, 1957, she was buried at Arlington Cemetery under the right of her army veteran husband, William Powell. Their graves are in Section 31, Lot 5703, fittingly behind the new Women's Memorial. It just didn't occur to anyone at that time to recognize that Julia too had been in the military. But her niece, Marian (Sellers) Wallace always worried about that and wanted to do something to recognize that Julia too was a veteran. She talked to officials at Arlington Cemetery, but they could do nothing without official records of Julia's service. We went to the Archives, but they informed us that those particular records were packed away in St. Louis. We were told that the records at St. Louis had burned. But even then Marian and her husband, David Wallace, wouldn't give up. It took Senator John Warner's inquiry to finally unearth the military records of Julia Rhinehart.

This year 2000 has seen a meaningful event at Arlington Cemetery. Forty-three years after her death, a new stone has been installed—this one



Martha B. Orth

Julia's grave, Arlington National Cemetery

noting Julia's own service in the military as a naval Yeoman (F). Through her pioneering female military service, Julia Rhinehart Powell has given a new historical dimension to an already very historic house.

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Martha Beggs Orth is a long-time member of the Arlington Historical Society and has previously served as its president. She is currently a member of the Ball-Sellers Committee. She retired from the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, and now lives in Falls Church.

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