

Searching for Molly Pitcher: An Exhibition Monmouth County Library, Manalapan October 2001

The Molly Pitcher Exhibit

The Molly Pitcher exhibit is intended to be an educational experience that probably brings together more images of Molly than ever seen publicly in one place. At one extreme Molly is depicted as a rough, heavy Irish woman (similar to accounts of Mary McCauley); on the other, a dainty, shapely maid, delicately firing off her cannon. These images, made over the past 150 years, show how Americans have interpreted and reinterpreted the past in order to serve their patriotic needs, influenced by the changing ideal American woman and evolving styles of art. The exhibit also includes examples of juvenile literature, to show how Molly has helped fulfill a need for heroines in American history texts for children.

The large W.P.A. mural painting of Molly Pitcher by Gerald Foster hanging in the library hallway is an integral part of this exhibit, although it has been here on loan from the Freehold Post Office since 1992. It is the probably the best known 20th century painting of Molly Pitcher.

Hopefully, this exhibit will spur future researchers and stimulate discussions in New Jersey schools of Molly Pitcher, the significance of the Battle of Monmouth, and the Revolutionary War.

Every nation needs heroes and heroines, especially when threatened. We don't need a reminder that America is worth fighting for, but we do need inspiration to be courageous. Molly Pitcher continues to be a powerful role model and a symbol of patriotism at the highest level. Whatever she did and whoever she was, she was there and she didn't run away in the midst of a terrible and bloody conflict, fought on an incredibly hot day in Monmouth County on June 28, 1778.

The Molly Pitcher Story

Molly Pitcher is a nickname for a woman well known today for her heroism at the Battle of Monmouth near Freehold, New Jersey, on June 28, 1778, although it is less than certain who she really was and what she really did.

Little appeared in writing about Molly Pitcher until the 1850s, when the first images of her began to be produced. Writers and artists first referred to Molly as Captain Molly or Sergeant Molly. Around 1860, she began to be called, "Moll Pitcher" or "Molly Pitcher," in reference to the story that she was bringing water to cool the cannon or to refresh the soldiers, or both.

Early published accounts confused Molly with another Revolutionary War heroine, Margaret Corbin, who fired a gun at a different battle. Eventually, it became clear that Molly Pitcher was another woman who died in 1832 named Mary (Molly) McCauley. Her descendants and former neighbors and employers provided sufficient oral testimony to establish that Mary McCauley had been at the battle, although exactly what she did there remains speculative.

After being identified as Molly Pitcher, Mary McCauley's grave in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, was marked with a head stone referencing the Battle of Monmouth in 1876. But the search for Molly, and mistakes concerning her identity, were not yet over. McCauley was the surname of Molly's last husband. In her obituary, it was mentioned that she had been married to a man named Hays who was in an artillery regiment during the Revolutionary War. In searching for records of men named Hays, historians came across a John Hays who was married to a Mary Ludwig. They also found a Casper Hays who was at the Battle of Monmouth. Taking a leap of faith, they concluded that Casper and John were the same person and that therefore Mary Ludwig, a girl of German origin, was Molly Pitcher.

Earlier accounts that Mary McCauley was clearly Irish were ignored. Many books and articles were published stating that Mary Ludwig was Molly Pitcher. A statue was placed next to Molly's grave by German Americans with the inscription, "née Mary Ludwig." For decades, no one challenged this information. Even Mary McCauley's descendants came to believe she was German.

In 1964, Samuel Stelle Smith of Monmouth County published a book on the Battle of Monmouth and then led an effort to uncover more information about Mary McCauley. With the help of Merri Lou Schaumann in Carlisle, Smith determined that, by the end of the war, Mary McCauley was unquestionably married to a William Hays, not John Hays. William Hays also was an artilleryman during the Revolutionary War. By a remarkable coincidence, there were two men named Hays from Carlisle, both artillerymen, and both with wives named Mary.

But if Mrs. William Hays was not Mary Ludwig, who was she and where did she come from? Although some historians have theories as to her true identity--including, in particular, that she was born Mary Hannah from Allentown, New Jersey--documentary evidence so far is lacking. The search for Molly Pitcher, therefore, continues.

Even less hard information is available on what Molly Pitcher actually did at the Battle of Monmouth. Early accounts (discussed below) stated that she fired a gun or a cannon after her husband was killed and that prior to this action, was bringing water to the troops or to her husband, who was in the artillery. But William Hays survived the war; he and Molly became parents of a son at the end of the war. This means that something is wrong about the story that her husband died at the Battle. There are several explanations, including 1) Mary McCauley was not Molly Pitcher; 2) Mary McCauley had a husband before William Hays; 3) the story is incorrect and William was just wounded, not killed, or not hurt at all.

Other aspects of the Molly Pitcher story, recounted in books about her, are mostly products of the authors' imaginations, but some accounts probably do contain the essence of the truth. Joseph Plumb Martin, an eyewitness whose memoir was published in 1830, wrote the first account in print about Molly. He recalled that a woman (whom he does not name) was assisting her husband at a gun. While reaching for an artillery cartridge, she had her legs spread wide apart and a cannonball passed between her legs, taking away some of her petticoats. (This story is so strikingly original that it is hard to believe that Martin could have invented it.) An article published in the *Washington Review and Examiner* (Washington, Pennsylvania), published May 29, 1830, as well as in other newspapers, stated that a woman named "Molly" was constantly running to bring water to her husband, who was firing a cannon. As she started from a nearby spring, she saw her husband fall. Running to him, she saw that he was dead and simultaneously heard an officer order the cannon removed. "No," said

Molly, "the cannon shall not be removed for want of someone to serve it; since my brave husband is no more, I will use my utmost exertions to avenge his death." Her actions, according to the story, drew the attention of General Washington, who afterwards awarded her the rank of Lieutenant and granted her half pay for life. In a later story, published in 1840, a Mary Clendenen wrote that her late husband, who had been at the Battle, merely mentioned that a woman called "Captain Molly" brought water to the troops.

Note that some of these earliest accounts didn't mention Molly's husband being killed or even wounded. Also, it may be significant that Martin didn't mention the water and Clendenen didn't mention the gun. However, the combination of the gun and the water, along with Molly's husband being killed, reported in the newspaper article of 1830, was further publicized by George Washington Parke Custis, the grandson of Martha Washington, in an article, "The Battle of Monmouth," published in the *National Intelligencer*, February 22, 1840, and reprinted in his memoirs in 1859. Custis also drew one of the first images of Molly at the Battle and later would use it as the basis for a painting in his home, now better known as the house of Robert E. Lee. In 1844, John W. Barber and Henry Howe included a similar story in *Historical Collections of the State of New Jersey*, 1844, and in 1853, Benson J. Lossing, in an article and sketch in *Harper's Monthly*, repeated the account with additional details; the story appeared again in Volume II of his *Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution* (1855). Among other sources, including Alexander Hamilton's aged widow, who confused the story of Molly Pitcher with that of Margaret Corbin, Lossing had been in contact with Custis. Lossing wrote that "Captain Molly" was a twenty-two-year old Irish lass engaged in bringing water to her husband when he was killed. Molly then seized the rammer and, vowing revenge, continued to work the cannon until the end of the battle. The next morning, according to Lossing, she was presented by General Greene to George Washington, who commissioned her as a sergeant (her husband's rank) and was awarded half-pay for life.

Unfortunately, very little of these early accounts have been verified. No record has been found of any woman, including Mary McCauley, receiving a military title after the Battle of Monmouth, nor is there any record of Molly's federal pension. Mary McCauley did apply for, and receive, a pension from the State of Pennsylvania in 1822 for her war service (*not* her husband's).

Whatever the truth of these heroic accounts, artists soon seized on them as the basis for paintings which spread the fame of Molly Pitcher. In 1848, Nathaniel Currier did a painting, "Molly Pitcher, The Heroine of Monmouth," the earliest known instance in which the heroine was called by this sobriquet, combining Captain Molly of the gun and the woman bringing water into one nickname. In the mid-1850s, she was depicted by Dennis Malone Carter in two famous paintings, one at the cannon and the other when she was presented to Washington by General Greene. The latter painting is now at the Monmouth County Historical Association, across the street from the Battle Monument, which features a plaque depicting Molly Pitcher. Other artists soon followed in Carter's footsteps and, by 1860, reproductions in the form of engravings were labeled, "Molly Pitcher." It is these images, along with theatrical performances and poetry, even more than the written accounts, that have spread the legend of Molly Pitcher. The use of the name, "Molly Pitcher," did not appear in an article or book until 1862, in Dr. James Thacher's *Military Journal*.

Scope and Content of the Exhibit

The Molly Pitcher Exhibit consisted of approximately 100 reproductions of images of Molly Pitcher,

articles and poems about Molly Pitcher, diagrams and maps of the Battlefield, and related materials. Some of the exhibit items were borrowed from Donald F.X. Finn and Carl Steinberg and returned to them. Most of the exhibit items are available in the Monmouth County Archives in three flat boxes. A list of the contents of all three boxes, prepared in 2017 by Emleigh Evans, a high school student intern, has been placed in Box 1.

Acknowledgments

The Monmouth County Archives brought the materials for the exhibit together. The portion of the exhibit on the curved wall in the lobby of the Monmouth County Library was designed and installed by the Monmouth County Art Department under the direction of Roberta Ohliger. In the early stages, staff members Carmen Triggiano, Laura Smothers, and Nabila Hai were particularly helpful. The following other individuals made important contributions to the exhibit, providing advice, encouragement, and materials: Donald F.X. Finn, Elsaly Palmisano, James Raleigh, and Carl Steinberg. Other essential contributions were made by Ellen McCallister Clark, John Fabiano, Lisa Fox, David G. Martin, Barbara Mitnick, Stacy Flora Roth, Garry Wheeler Stone, and Carla Tobias (later Carla Zimmerman).

The Monmouth County Archives is under the direction of the County Clerk, M. Claire French, without whose support this exhibit would not be possible.

Gary D. Saretzky, Monmouth County Archivist (revised January 8, 2003; April 18, 2017; May 9, 2017; January 24, 2019)

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Note: The compiler of this bibliography makes no claim to the accuracy of any of these works. It also does not pretend to completeness but is intended to provide a starting point for those interested in Molly Pitcher.

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