



After 200-plus years of myth-making, it's difficult to find an accurate image conveying Mary Hays McCauley's true contributions to the Patriot cause.

Mary Hays McCauley and the Myth of Molly Pitcher

By Sharon McDonnell

Some say Mary Hays McCauley was one of the primary inspirations for the legend of Molly Pitcher. But whereas Molly Pitcher is now considered to be a fictional character inspired by several different women, McCauley earned the title of Patriot due to her proven service at the Valley Forge encampment.

The Real Mary

Mary Ludwig Hays McCauley was born around 1754 near Trenton, N.J., though her birthplace is disputed. Her parents are thought to have been German, Dutch or Irish, and her father was a dairy farmer or a butcher. She probably was not taught to read or write, and some sources say that when she was 13, she was sent to Carlisle, Pa., to work as a household servant.

She likely married her first husband, William Hays, reputed to be a barber, when she was still a teenager. When Hays joined the First Pennsylvania Regiment in 1777, training as an artilleryman or gunner, she followed him. She and other camp followers cooked, sewed, washed clothes and took care of the troops at Valley Forge during the brutal winter of 1777–1778.

In the June 1778 Battle of Monmouth, Hays was wounded or killed. With her husband's cannon abandoned, McCauley was thought to have taken his place to fire at the British.

After being widowed, she married John McCauley. Living in Carlisle in her later life, she often reminisced about firing a cannon, notes Mark Edward Lender, professor of history at Kean University in Union, N.J. Lender is the co-author of a book about the Battle of Monmouth called *Fatal Sunday: George Washington, the Monmouth Campaign, and the Politics of Battle* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2015).

In 1822, the state of Pennsylvania awarded a pension to a woman named Mary Ludwig Hays McCauley for “services rendered” during the Revolutionary War. She received \$40 annually—more than the usual widow's pension. McCauley is believed to have died a decade later, in January 1832.

Molly the Legend

The legend takes McCauley's battle story further, claiming she carried a pitcher of water from a nearby spring to thirsty soldiers in the Battle of Monmouth, and that her nickname became a contraction of their cries for “Molly, the pitcher.” In some versions of the legend, George Washington later gives McCauley a gold coin or a hatful of gold coins, and promotes her to sergeant or captain.

McCauley and Pitcher have been linked in the public consciousness since at least 1876, when an unmarked grave believed to be McCauley's was opened. Those remains were reburied in the Old Public Graveyard in Carlisle, Pa., under a statue of McCauley holding a cannon tamper and standing behind a cannon. The statue, erected by the state of Pennsylvania in 1916, was designed by prominent monument sculptor J. Otto Schweizer and based on a composite of features from her female descendants. McCauley's grave, behind the monument, is marked with an 1876 tombstone equating her with Molly Pitcher.

Despite the persistent power of the myth, most historians believe Molly Pitcher was a composite figure based on several different women who performed heroic or sacrificial acts during Revolutionary battles.

Linda Grant DePauw, professor emeritus of history at George Washington University, tackles the discrepancies

head-on in her novel about an eighth-grade girl writing a term paper about Pitcher in *In Search of Molly Pitcher* (Peacock Press of Pasadena, 2007). Written like a historical mystery, the novel weighs the probability of contradictory claims, as the girl learns the difference between primary, eyewitness accounts and secondary research sources, and cross-checks references, helped by her ex-detective great-grandfather, reference librarians and a historian. Her conclusion: Pitcher wasn't a real person but a symbol of female bravery in the Revolutionary War.

"Historical sources do confirm that at least two women fought in the Battle of Monmouth—one was at an artillery position, the other in the infantry line—but there is no evidence linking either of them to McCauley," DePauw says. And her obituary doesn't mention the Battle of Monmouth or a cannon, she adds.

Lender believes McCauley was in the battle, but adds, "Her role is anything but clear, and she certainly was not the only woman there."

A Battle of Monmouth veteran, Sergeant John Clendenin, spoke often of a "Captain Molly" who carried canteens to the troops, his widow swore in her 1840 pension application.

Two eyewitness accounts describe a woman engaged in combat during the Battle of Monmouth who is probably McCauley, asserts James Kirby Martin, professor of history at the University of Houston. The surgeon of the First Connecticut Regiment, Dr. Albigeance Waldo, described in a July 1778 letter to his wife an unidentified woman who took over her husband's cannon after he was shot down. "She immediately took up his gun and cartridges and like a Spartan heroine fought with astonishing bravery, discharging the piece with as much regularity as any soldier present," he said a wounded officer told him.

The diary of a Connecticut soldier, Joseph Plumb Martin, reported the steely calm of a woman serving with her husband in the artillery, carrying ammunition from the box to the loader. He saw a cannonball shot between her legs tear off the bottom of her petticoat as she reached for a cartridge. "Looking at it with apparent unconcern, she observed it was lucky it did not pass a little higher, for in that case it might have carried away something else, and continued her occupation," he wrote.

According to historian Martin, sexist attitudes transformed the woman warrior into the gentle water-carrier. "For a woman to be engaged in combat was both unfeminine and unladylike," he says. "[The idea of] a hardened woman of low social status who was helping to fire cannons needed some cleansing." The resulting revision had Molly not engaged in combat but carrying water to troops suffering from heat prostration. "That way, she was acting within acceptable social roles as defined for women during the Victorian era," Martin says.

Other Claims to the Name

The life of Margaret Cochran Corbin seemingly added more details to the Molly Pitcher legend. Continental Congress awarded her a pension for artillery service during the Battle of Fort Washington in 1776, in Manhattan's Washington Heights. Margaret replaced her husband, John Corbin, who was killed while at the cannon. She was severely wounded in that same battle, and became the only Revolutionary War soldier to be buried with full military honors at West Point, according to the National Women's History Museum. (Learn more about Margaret Corbin in the March/April 2011 issue.)

In 1779, the Continental Congress stated, "That Margaret Corbin, who was wounded and disabled in the attack on Fort Washington, whilst she heroically filled the post of her husband who was killed by her side serving a piece of artillery, do receive, during her natural life Or the continuance of the said disability, the one-half of the monthly pay drawn by a soldier in the service of these states." But Corbin couldn't have inspired the Pitcher legend, DePauw says. "Few people knew about her until long after the Molly Pitcher story was known to every schoolchild."

The view of women's roles was so limited that when Deborah Samson Gannett, who disguised herself as a man to enlist with the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment, later lectured about her experience, she felt compelled to apologize for having "swerved from the flowery path of female delicacy," noted *Weathering the Storm: Women of the American Revolution* (Paragon House, 1989), a book by Elizabeth Evans. (Read more about Gannett in the May/June 2009 issue.) She was thought to be the only woman besides Corbin to receive a federal pension for military service, which took her almost 20 years to win, despite affidavits from her commanding officer and a captain.

Gannett's advocate appeared to be Patriot and silversmith Paul Revere, who reassured Congressman William Eustis that as a wife and mother of three, she had reformed her unfeminine ways and was a "small, effeminate and conversable woman."

Ultimately, Congress stated that "the whole history of the American Revolution records no other single example of female heroism, fidelity and courage" than hers. Ironically, after Gannett's death in 1827 her husband petitioned for her pension and won, receiving a higher amount (\$80 a year) than she ever did.

Larger Than a Legend

Examining the Molly Pitcher legend reveals the varied roles and heroism of women during the Revolutionary War. Whether they foraged for food to supplement soldiers' meager rations, followed their husbands to war to assist them or to avoid poverty, served as nurses, or took up weapons, "Women were an integral part of 18th-century armies, both American and British," Lender explains. 🍷