



Hannah Till, her husband, Issac, and their family settled in Philadelphia, shown here circa 1800.

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Sold by R. Campbell & Co. No. 55, Chestnut St. Philad. 1799.

ARCH STREET, with the Second Presbyterian CHURCH.
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ILLUMINATING HANNAH TILL

A trusted cook to George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette endured one of the Revolution's most grueling tests of survival.

By Abbey Dean

So many of those who aided the cause of the American Revolution will never grace the pages of history books or have their names etched into commemorative plaques or memorials. This is especially true for the countless African-American volunteers, soldiers and families whose names and contributions may never be revealed.

Fortunately, Hannah Till is not among the unknown. There are conflicting birth dates for Till, but she was born into slavery somewhere between 1728 and 1758 and given the surname of Longpoint, according to John Fanning Watson in his 1830 *Annals of Philadelphia*. She worked as a cook and was allowed to sell her own homemade goods from time to time. Till was eventually

able to buy her freedom in 1756, assuming the new surname Archer. (Why she chose that name is unknown.)

Not long after, Hannah decided to take on another name: She met and married Issac Till, a whipmaker from New York, according to the Pennsylvania Septennial Census of 1793. The couple settled in Philadelphia's Seventh Ward. They are thought to have had seven children.

A Volunteering Spirit

At the start of the American Revolution, Issac and Hannah were hired by George Washington's staff, becoming the general's personal cooks. The Tills served in Washington's many military

campaigns over the next six-and-a-half years. She's best known for her service during the grueling 1777-1778 winter encampment at Valley Forge.

Though Washington chose the location because of its proximity to British-held Philadelphia—and to keep a close eye on General William Howe's British army—the site's crude conditions are remembered as a low point for the Continental Army. While Redcoats enjoyed the comfort and warmth of the confiscated homes of colonists, Continental Army soldiers endured freezing temperatures, constant hunger and widespread disease.

On February 16, 1778, Washington wrote to George Clinton, a former brigadier general in the New York militia and the newly elected governor of New York, on a subject that "occasions me more distress, than I have felt, since the commencement of the war; and which loudly demands the most zealous exertions of every person of weight and authority, who is interested in the success of our affairs."

Requesting any assistance possible, Washington wrote:

It is more alarming than you will probably conceive, for, to form a just idea, it were necessary to be on the spot. For some days past, there has been little less, than a famine in camp. A part of the army has been a week, without any kind of flesh, and the rest for three or four days. Naked and starving as they are, we cannot enough admire the incomparable patience and fidelity of the soldiery, that they have not been ere this excited by their sufferings, to a general mutiny or dispersion. Strong symptoms, however, discontent have appeared in particular instances; and nothing but the most active efforts every where can long avert so shocking a catastrophe.

Valley Forge Survivors

During that unusually harsh winter, Till gave birth to a son, Issac Worley Till Jr. The Tills' son would be one of the few children born among Washington's army during the war. Records from the Philadelphia Scots Presbyterian Church revealed their son was baptized on the fourth Sunday of August 1779 at the age of 19 months.

A few years later, after General Charles Cornwallis surrendered to Washington at Yorktown, the general lent Till's services as a cook to the Marquis de Lafayette. Till stayed with Lafayette for six months before her contract with Washington ended and she returned to Philadelphia. She obviously earned Lafayette's respect

and friendship: When he returned to the United States for his grand tour in 1824, Lafayette visited Till and gave her money to pay off debts so she could avoid losing her home.

Till died on December 13, 1826. She and her family were buried in the original burial ground of Philadelphia's First African Presbyterian Church, where they had become members. When the burial ground was sold, her remains were moved to Lebanon Cemetery in Collingdale, Pa., then reinterred at the historic Eden Cemetery also in Collingdale, where they remain today.

Genealogical research by DAR member Marion T. Lane was instrumental in Till being named a DAR Patriot. "Hannah serves as an example of a woman of loyalty, fortitude and skill who young girls should learn was an unsung hero of the Revolutionary War," she said.

On October 3, 2015, the Pennsylvania State Society DAR, led by Pennsylvania State Regent Bobbi McMullen, honored Till with a new headstone at a graveside ceremony.

"This is a rarity," McMullen told *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. "The generals are all written up, but there are so many people who worked hard for the cause whose contributions are little known." ☀

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