

'CAPT MOLLIE' TO REST AT WEST POINT: Body of Revolutionary Heroine ...

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Captain Mollie Fired and Fired Into the Charging Hessians.

'CAPT MOLLIE' TO REST AT WEST POINT

Body of Revolutionary Heroine Who Served Fort Washington's Gun Will Be Reburied With Military Honors

ONE hundred and fifty years have rolled by since the first American woman to shed her blood on the battlefield in the cause of liberty fell at an earthwork redoubt in the hilly northern end of Manhattan. It was in the famous battle of Fort Washington on the Heights that "Captain Mollie" Corbin, the earliest fighting heroine of a new nation, on a raw November day, while the bayonets of the Hessians came storming up the steep slope near the line of the present 155th Street, showed that the courage of America's women was equal to that of its men.

The name of Molly Pitcher, who manned a cannon at Monmouth, is known in every household—the fame of "Captain Mollie" Corbin, whose heroism was performed a full two years earlier, has been spread to no such extent. Now, however, she is to be awarded signal honor for her glorious courage. The remains of Margaret Corbin are to be removed from their resting place on the J. P. Morgan estate at Highland Falls to the military cemetery at West Point and a fitting monument will be raised above her grave. Also, in the big church at the army post, near which she spent the last years of her life, a tablet will be dedicated to her memory by the Daughters of the American Revolution. She took a soldier's share in the desperate conflict for the Heights and she is to receive a soldier's burial.

She Stepped Into His Place

The chronicles of the American Revolution—many events of which are being celebrated this year on the arrival of the century and a half anniversary mark—contain no more vivid single incident than that of Margaret Corbin, the wife of the artilleryman who fell at his post in the riddled redoubt overlooking the Hudson at 155th Street, on November 16, 1776.

She saw her husband go down under the raking fire of the Hessians' guns. She stepped into his place as he fell and served his cannon until a burst of grapeshot hurled her to the ground and the German steel rolled over the breastworks. When the cannon of "Captain Mollie" ceased fire the fate of the little outpost was sealed—the next charge of Knyphausen's mercenaries carried the hill. Already from the south and east the British infantry, cav-

alry and Highlanders had swept back the outnumbered American forces, driving them in retreat upon the main works of Fort Washington. The outpost to the north was the last to fall—when it went the garrison was doomed.

Washington had extricated his forces from Long Island, had held off an attempt at White Plains to catch him from the north, and had got his main forces across the Hudson to Fort Lee and beyond. In a council of war it had been decided to evacuate the island of Manhattan, with the exception of Fort Washington on the Heights, which with Fort Lee on the Jersey shore would prevent British warships from ascending the river. To guard against a British march on New Jersey and Philadelphia Washington was with his army headquarters at Hackensack. Meantime British troops in Manhattan—Redcoats and Hessians—had prepared to clean out the last defenses of the Americans on the rocky hills. Skirmish after skirmish had been fought as the British moved north until they reached the vicinity of 110th Street.

As the enemy progressed spades and picks were busy on the hillsides of Washington Heights. The defenders of Fort Washington consisted of 2,800 men under Colonel Robert Magaw, who were about to face a combined army of 9,000 in a gallant effort to hold this strategic position. On the night of Nov. 2 Colonel Magaw's adjutant, William Demant, deserted to the camp of Lord Percy and gave him the plans and troop dispositions of the fort. Percy, elated, sent word to Howe in Westchester County.

By Nov. 12 the whole British army was closing in on Fort Washington—Knyphausen and his Hessians crossed Spuyten Duyvil and Dyckman Valley to the steeps of what is now known as the Billings Place. Howe placed batteries along the banks of the Harlem. Percy sent warships up the Hudson. Highlanders were set to scale the bluffs at Jubel mansion. British and Hessians under Cornwallis approached

Laurel Hill. Howe and Percy advanced with troops from the south.

Lord Howe summoned Colonel Magaw, the commander of Fort Washington, to surrender. Magaw refused. General Nathanael Greene, commanding the American division at Fort Lee, came across the river to visit Colonel Magaw in this crisis. "The fort will be held to the end," declared its commander bluntly. It was the spirit which animated the entire garrison from its Colonel to "Captain Mollie" Cor-

gone his wife Margaret whom he had married four years before. Together they had left their home to share the hardships of field and camp. As a regimental nurse "Captain Mollie" already had come into contact with all the horrors of war and she had not turned aside.

She was of true pioneer stock, this Margaret Corbin. Only the merest chance had saved her in childhood from the perils of a frontier where savages raided and wild beasts roamed. Her father, Robert Cochran, fell in a desperate struggle against the Indians, who descended upon the family's cabin in Franklin County, Pa. "Captain Mollie's" mother was borne off as a captive by the savages. But Mollie happened to be away from home, visiting an uncle. He adopted her when he learned of the tragedy. It was just such a grim tale as scores of America's early homes knew.

So "Captain Mollie" stood at her husband's side as dawn broke on the morning of Nov. 16, 1776, knowing that the power of Britain's army was to be hurled against Fort Washington and its system of outworks. The garrison of the fort itself had been sent out to man the works on the north, the lines at the old Morris house and below it to 147th Street, and the defenses at "Laurel Hill"—later known as Fort George—to the east near the Harlem River. General Washington, then at Hackensack, across the Hudson, had been told of the coming attack on the fort, and with the courageous words of Magaw still ringing had deferred a decision on possible withdrawal of the garrison. He went to Fort Lee to consult Greene. But Greene and Israel Putnam had gone to consult with Magaw. Washington sought to cross after them in a row-boat and met them in midstream returning. The next day Colonel Cadwallader was holding the British in check at Harlem Plains. Washington crossed the river to his line, reconnoitred the position and returned to Fort Lee, and Cadwallader fell back on Fort Washington.

On the east the British light infantry and Highlanders now had

crossed the Harlem River in their boats and swarmed up the woody slopes of Laurel Hill. No defense of scattering rifle fire from the "flying camp" of Pennsylvania volunteers stationed there could repel an assault delivered with such rapidity and pressed home in such strength. Slowly but surely the Americans were driven from their position on the crest of the hill and across the broken ground toward Fort Washington. The Highlanders had stormed through near High Bridge, urged on by a Major so fat that he was left behind in the charge, unable to climb the hill. To the south in the meantime British dragoons and infantry had been pouring forward, overwhelming the stubborn defense of the Continental troops who had been flung across Broadway.

Amid the Crash of Cannon

At the line of 155th Street the Highlanders and British effected a junction and pressed on toward the heights on the Hudson where the real struggle was to be concluded. For hours the crash of cannon and the rattle of musketry had been drifting in from the south and east, but still the third attack—the drive on Fort Tryon—had not been delivered. Lord Howe, made aware of the weaknesses of the American position by the first traitorous action of an American commissioned officer in the Revolution, had full information on Fort Washington's defending force and plans of its works in his hands. Years later, destitute and exile, William Demant, who had been Colonel Magaw's adjutant, wrote to the British authorities begging for money as a reward for having deserted the American garrison under cover of night and given its secrets to the foe.

And then, at last, on Nov. 16 the storm broke on the redoubt to the north, where Margaret Corbin stood beside her husband's cannon. Today only a fragment of the northeast bastion of the famous Fort Tryon remains, perched on top of the great rock that was the bulwark of the American defense. The luxurious bulk of "Tryon Towers," the mansion built by C. K. G. Billings and sold a few years ago to John D. Rockefeller Jr., occupies the site of what was once the old earth fort that hurled its fire at the Hessians as they came on in waves of shoving

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A Soldier's Burial for Captain Mollie.

bin, who stood by her husband's side in the crude redoubt to the north, near 155th Street, which at that date never even had a name. Later, when the British took it, it was christened Fort Tryon in honor of the last English Governor of New York; as Fort Tryon it has come down through the years. To its force of Virginia and Maryland riflemen and Pennsylvania artillerymen it represented a position which must be held at all costs. Abbatis of felled trees had been thrown up on the rugged slopes of the height where Fort Tryon stood; its earthworks were crowned with a pair of cannon, one of them served by John Corbin, the young private from Virginia who had enlisted with the Pennsylvania guns. With him throughout his campaigning had

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shakos, waxed mustaches and fierce bayonets. From the shelter of the abatis the Maryland, Virginia and Pennsylvania riflemen shot with deadly accuracy—the ragged hillside was thick with the bodies of fallen Germans. Three times their line came on and flung itself at the sides of Fort Tryon's rock and three times it fell back shattered. From the Hudson the guns of the British frigate Pearl supported the advance of Knyphausen's troops, showering its shot over the defenders.

At one of the two cannon through all the fury of three hours of continuous battle "Captain Mollie" Corbin was the helper of her husband. She saw the Hessians come plunging up the hill, clinging to bushes and trees to drag themselves along, while their batteries from another eminence slashed the earthworks beside her. She saw General Knyphausen place himself at the head of his men and hoarsely roar to them "Forward, grenadiers!" With his own hands Knyphausen tore at the abatis amid a shower of bullets. Those were the days when a General led the charge in person—the Hessians' commander seemed to bear a charmed life.

John Corbin fell, pitching to the ground with a bullet through his breast—one more martyr to the cause of liberty—and the gun he had been firing went silent. The Hessians were forming now for a final attack. They had worked their way along the shore of the Hudson and were menacing the fort from its weakest side. In that instant Margaret Corbin became "Captain Mollie" to the end of history. The figure of a woman in a homespun dress rose beside the cannon of John Corbin and over her husband's body "Captain Mollie" loaded and fired and fired again into the charging Hessians. The volunteers beside her cheered even in that desperate moment. The other gun had been dismounted by a shot from the German artillery.

Then came a sudden ripping, blasting report and "Captain Mollie" fell, not to rise again to the defense of her country. Three grapeshot had struck her in the arm and breast—the last gun on Fort Tryon had spoken its defiance. Over the ramparts came the Hessian grenadiers, and clubbed rifles crashed in vain against the cold steel of bayonets.

Wounded almost to death, Margaret Corbin could not see the desperate retreat along the ridge to Fort Washington, the Americans fighting to the last against their pursuers. Between 155th Street and 183d Street, where the northeast bastion of Fort Washington stood, over half a mile of craggy hillside, many a grim relic of that retreat has been discovered since—muskets, cannon balls, bones of the fallen. The struggle at Fort Tryon was a combat between 4,700

Hessians and 600 Americans. It could end in only one way.

When slowly the fringes of battle drew away from the hill British medical officers came on the field. They were more than amazed to discover in the wrecked redoubt the body of a woman, blackened with powder as though she had been serving a cannon. Wounded and helpless, "Captain Mollie" received treatment and then was carried by boat across the Hudson under a flag of truce and given into the charge of General Greene. The only stipulation made was that she should not again take up arms for America in the war.

With other sick and wounded "Captain Mollie," famous now forever, was transported to Philadelphia, the capital of the new nation. Perhaps for a while she did not know that the fort she had so gallantly helped to defend had fallen, that Magaw, hopelessly outnumbered and hemmed in on every side, had at last capitulated to General Knyphausen and the British Adjutant General Patterson. Perhaps it was a long while before Mollie heard of the dashing feat of Captain Gooch, who crossed the river from the Jersey shore and made his way through the ring of bayonets and into the fort with Washington's message that if the garrison could hold out until night the army at Fort Lee would try to bring them off.

But the daring, Gooch had arrived too late—Fort Washington was lost. He leaped from its parapet, darted through the brush of the present Fort Washington Park, and, defying the bayonets and bullets of the British to harm him, escaped to his waiting boat and took the news of the defeat back to Washington. It was seven years before the American flag flew again on Manhattan Island, for the retreat of Washington through New Jersey commenced shortly after the battle.

At Philadelphia "Captain Mollie" was formally entered on the rolls of the Invalids' Regiment. The Supreme Council granted her an award of \$30 and recommended her for a pension, which she received. To the end of her life "Captain Mollie," the heroine of Fort Washington, received a soldier's half pay and "the value of a suit of clothes a year." When victory came she was quartered near West Point, supported by the military establishment in the home of a private family at Swimstown. In 1800 she died at the age of 49 and was buried at Highland Falls.

The ground where she fought is historic now. Hessians are buried there still; so are many of the Americans. And the memory of Margaret Corbin remains indissolubly a part of Washington Heights in the street which runs between the curves of Fort Washington Avenue at 158th Street and bears her name.

S. M. E.